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# Using Church-Based Savings Groups for Trauma Healing and Peacebuilding: A View from the Field in South Sudan

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This article addresses the role of church-based savings groups in trauma healing and community peacebuilding amid ongoing conflict in South Sudan. In partnership with the Episcopal Church of South Sudan and Mothers' Union, Five Talents—a Christian non-governmental organization (NGO)—has implemented a savings group program that has improved livelihoods for thousands. Since 2018, the initiative has integrated trauma healing, acknowledging the link between unresolved trauma and cyclical violence. Through peer counseling and everyday peacebuilding practices, participants have addressed trauma, fostered interethnic trust, and engaged in local advocacy. Findings indicate enhanced household and community relationships, greater economic agency, and progress toward reconciliation. The study underscores the interconnection between trauma, livelihoods, and peacebuilding, highlighting the potential of localized, faith-based interventions in fostering community-based positive peace in conflict-affected settings.

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## Introduction

It is extremely difficult to carry out development work in the midst of armed conflict, and many if not most international organizations, including Christian ones, tend to focus primarily on relief work in those contexts. What is lost in this, however, are the ways that local actors, including the church, continue to press forward in these difficult situations when both development and peacebuilding efforts seem necessary.

One such situation is in South Sudan, where a ministry of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan called Mothers' Union partners with Five Talents (FT), an international Christian organization that “trains women and men to find a sustainable path out of extreme poverty through entrepreneurship” (Five Talents n.d.). In 2018, they integrated a trauma healing and peacebuilding component into their ongoing work with literacy and savings groups.

This article describes the process by which this happened and assesses the reasons for the program's success. It begins with a brief history of the situation in South Sudan, describes the how and why of the project and the ideas behind its implementation, and then presents the results to date. The article concludes with some ideas about why this program has been so effective.

## South Sudan Context

In 2011, South Sudan became the youngest nation on earth, born out of civil war in Sudan. In December 2013, South Sudan fell into its own civil war. Despite repeated attempts at peace agreements and cease-fires in 2015, 2017, and 2018, political violence and instability have persisted between government forces and opposition factions (Center for Preventive Action 2025). In 2018, after nearly five years of civil war, Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, the heads of the two main opposing political coalitions, participated in negotiations and signed the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (Ibid.). This peace deal led to a cease-fire and the formation of a unity government in 2020. But as of March 2025, the implementation of the agreement has been worryingly slow, and extensions to the transitional period have been necessary (Security Council Report 2022). For example, long-delayed elections scheduled for December 2024 have been further postponed to December 2026 (Freedom House 2024).

During the official peace process, the United Nations (UN) and multilateral agencies have continually remarked upon the ongoing violence across the country including “pervasive insecurity and particular intercommunal violence” (Security Council

Report 2022). For example, between April to June 2024, UN Mission to South Sudan (UNMISS) reported a 43% increase in incidents involving violence against civilians as compared to the same period in 2023 (“Brief on Violence...” 2024). Major incidents took place in six of the ten states of South Sudan, including all four major forms of individual harm experienced by victims in the context of the armed conflict (i.e., killings, injuries, abductions, and Conflict Related Sexual Violence [CRSV]) (Ibid.) UNMISS has also stated that “intra/intercommunal violence involving community-based militias and/or civil defense groups linked to border disputes, cross-border violence, cyclical attacks and retaliatory attacks, as well as ethnic polarization, continued to be the primary driving factor of violence affecting civilians throughout the country” (USAID 2019). These reports provide a picture of how official and unofficial conflicts at local, regional and national levels continue to affect communities across the country. Bearing this in mind, it is unsurprising to note that a USAID study indicated that 41% of South Sudan’s population displayed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, rising to 51% among displaced people and informal settlements (Ibid.).

### **Episcopal Church of South Sudan and the Savings Group Partnership with Five Talents**

Since 2007, eleven dioceses of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan (ECSS) have entered into partnership with FT around a project to create savings groups linked with the church.<sup>1</sup> The implementing ministry of the church is Mothers’ Union of South Sudan, the women’s ministry of the ECSS and a member of the worldwide Mothers’ Union movement affiliated with the Anglican church (“Our Story” n.d.). The project uses a method called the Literacy and Financial Education Program (LFEP), which provides one year of participatory adult literacy and numeracy to majority women’s groups in three regions of South Sudan. This foundational focus on literacy has been necessary because literacy rates in South Sudan are 35% overall, and only 20% among adult women aged 25-64 (UNESCO n.d.). Informal surveys by FT suggest that

literacy rates among adult women in some rural areas might be as low as 10%. Without the capacity to read and write, savings group members find it difficult to maintain records transparently, and to build the trust needed for successful functioning of a savings group. After one year of functional literacy, the program moves into a phase of savings group formation and management and business skills training, during which the savings groups are officially formed and launched. This project is active in three states of South Sudan and has provided literacy and numeracy for 22,075 women and men. Along with literacy and numeracy, FT and its partners have supported savings groups among 71,434 women and men in the last 18 years across more than 2,850 groups.<sup>2</sup>

### **Integrating a Trauma-Informed Peacebuilding Approach**

In 2018, the leaders of Mothers’ Union South Sudan and the Episcopal Church recognized that they wanted to influence their communities for peace, especially with regard to helping people heal from the trauma of ongoing conflict and insecurity. They saw this as the work of the Church following the model of Jesus’ ministry and a contribution towards building peace in South Sudan. But the peace they wanted to contribute to was not just defined by an absence of violence and fighting since they knew that ending violence was not enough. Lasting change would come through restored relationships and holistic human flourishing. This move towards an integrated, “trauma-informed” peacebuilding approach was based on two fundamental insights.

The first was the recognition that violence causes trauma, which may cause more violence. Thus, peacebuilding must be trauma-informed, recognizing the impact of trauma on people’s lives and using it as a lens.<sup>3</sup> A key insight to being trauma-informed is that people who have been traumatized are more likely to hurt people and perpetuate a cycle of violence (USAID 2019). If trauma is both an effect and a cause of conflict, then trauma healing must be part of peacebuilding

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<sup>1</sup> FT has been working in South Sudan since 2007. Its current implementing partners include Mothers’ Union South Sudan, Episcopal Church of South Sudan as well as World Concern Development Organisation. This article focuses particularly on the work of Mothers’ Union South Sudan and ECSS. American Friends of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan (AFRECS) and Mothers’ Union Worldwide are also strategic partners in this project. AFRECS has worked alongside FT to refine and support the trauma healing and peacebuilding curricula relevant to this article.

<sup>2</sup> This data is from FT’s internal monitoring, evaluation, and learning data. For the purposes of this article, henceforth all data will refer to the programs in Juba among internally displaced people from all over the country, in Renk within the Upper Nile region on the border with Sudan and South Sudan, and in Terekeka in Central Equatoria.

<sup>3</sup> Trauma-informed means recognizing the impact of trauma in the lives of all people—in other words, no one is immune to this experience. The assumption is that people offering healing from trauma have also experienced trauma (see Knight 2019).

(Ibid.). Without addressing the effect of trauma, traumatized people are less able to participate at the community level as agents for peace. Furthermore, they may actively inflame conflict as a result of their own experiences.

The second insight noted the limitations of trauma healing through short-term, one-off interactions. While this can be an important introduction, one-off workshops can miss the point that trauma healing is an ongoing process rather than a specific event. Noting this, the vision of Mothers' Union and ECSS dioceses involved in this project proposed an alternative, which was to leverage the relationships already forming within literacy and savings groups to pilot trauma healing and peacebuilding training as part of the established group methodology.

The trauma healing training implemented within savings groups consisted of an informal peer-to-peer counselling methodology in which members learn about the impact of trauma (giving them a language to talk about it), recognize and reflect on the consequences of trauma in their own lives, and share this with other group members. Such peer-to-peer counselling is recognized as a valuable component of trauma healing (Lane 2003, 116-17), and meets local needs given that, realistically, this type of counselling is the only kind people can access in a country with a very low provision of mental health services (USAID 2019). This training helps people connect abstract concepts of peace, conflict, trauma, and others with personal experience, making possible the skills to do something about it in their own lives or the lives of their community. It is particularly effective using the empowering platform of cohesive relationships in the savings groups. For example, the FT team in Renk recount a story of a colonel in the army who shared that "we learned about traumatic stress, we never knew about this thing. But we were forced to do many bad things" (SPLA soldier, January 31, 2020). This was the first time he and many other soldiers had the opportunity to reflect on the many traumatic experiences they had gone through and to connect them with how they felt and how they lived now.

The peacebuilding aspect of the training is based on the concept of "everyday peace" that has been popularized by the work of Roger Mac Ginty (2014) and Pamela Firchow (2018). As a new "bottom up" approach to peacebuilding, it is defined as

... the practices, norms and stances deployed by individuals and groups in deeply divided societies to avoid and minimise conflict at both the intra and inter-group level. It is a form of tactical agency and depends on social awareness, an ability to "read" situations and react accordingly. It is also logic or a way of thinking.

It can be both conflict-calming and conflict-provoking, and often occurs in unthreatening or marginal spaces (Mac Ginty 2014, 553).

As this definition suggests, each person in every community has the capacity either to inflame or calm conflict. These are strategies that many people living in conflict affected areas already have and employ naturally in order to "get on with life," and as seen above, they can be deeply impacted by trauma. Building everyday peace is an asset-based approach to peacebuilding. It starts with the strengths and resources already in a community and builds upon those rather than externally imposing ideas and structures. This is both an approach and a mindset, and in the case of this project, 67% of the savings groups participants participated in "everyday peacebuilding" activities as a result of the trauma training. Topics covered included mediating household and community conflict, advocating for victims of domestic violence, and intentionally building bridges with people from other ethnic groups.

The results of this integrated approach have been remarkable. First, according to Mothers' Union staff, participants typically respond to the training by empathizing with one another as they grieve and experience challenges, providing support for other members as well as family and community members. Staff describe this as members "carrying each other's burdens through prayer and pastoral care." Second, participants report that they are better able to recognize symptoms of trauma in themselves and others and speak out against further cycles of violence (and apathy to violence) as coping mechanisms within their homes and communities. For example, "revenge attacks" or retaliatory violence is one way that participants have noted people giving expression to their hurt and pain. While not everyone may support "revenge killing," many people have become desensitized or numb to violence and other people's suffering. After gaining a trauma-informed lens through which participants can view their experiences, they are more likely to be sensitive to the suffering of others in the community and to actively oppose retaliatory violence. Lastly, savings group members have demonstrated that they are willing to share in the community about their personal journeys and desire for peace as a form of advocacy.

One community involved in the project provides a powerful example. In an interview, the pastor in that community recounted an ethnically motivated attack which razed their whole village and destroyed their church in 2021. Community members lost lives and property—cattle were stolen, houses were burned down, and food stores were purposefully destroyed. In fear for their lives, the community members fled across a regional border and remained displaced for more than

one year. When they returned to their village and began to rebuild, many community members became involved in the savings group program. As the pastor shared:

Many had lost their faith in God as a result of what happened, but it was restored in this [program]. It was as if people were born again. When we received this training, we decided that we wanted to invite those who had harmed us to come and reconcile with us. We wanted to tell them that they were forgiven so that we could live in peace together. Even we began to talk about how—as we began to hope again—that we wanted to rebuild the church. These people—those who burned the church—have already contributed more than 70 poles (for constructing the tukul and roof). Even some of them will come to church and we can pray together (June 5, 2024).

Such attitudinal and behavioral changes can also be seen in the measurable differences that members reported experiencing as a result of the trainings. Members reported that as their personal capacity to cope with trauma has improved, so too have their household and community relationships. For example, from a December 2023 sample of 2,568 participants from 3 regions, 74% of members reported improved household relationships as a result of their participation in the trauma healing training and their improved coping mechanisms. Moreover, 1,983 (77%) participants also reported improved community relationships as a result of trauma healing and peacebuilding training. This had much to do with the ability to forgive: “Their relatives were killed. Their properties were looted. But they have learned that they can forgive and start a new life,” remarked a Juba program trainer (July 30, 2021). “They have been able to forgive those who have hurt them, and this has freed them to pursue opportunities beyond dwelling on their pain,” observed another (April 27, 2022). These responses to the training constitute positive contributions towards building everyday peace—recognizing and using the strategies that are available to support peace in their communities and to address conflicts before they arise. This continues in spite of lack of progress in the formal peace process.

### **The Key Dimensions of Improved Livelihoods and Trust Building**

Why has this project has been so successful in the

midst of the continuing violence in South Sudan? In analyzing the results of this locally led endeavor, two insights take shape that might inform peacebuilding in other contexts: the trauma-informed dimensions of improved livelihoods and trust-building.

#### ***Improved Livelihoods***

First, the improved livelihoods and development dimension of savings group promotion may have played a key role in the success around trauma healing and peacebuilding. There may be three reasons for this. First, there will always be people who profit from war, but in large part, war destroys property and prosperity, stalling and reversing economic development. The economic despair that comes from having one’s livelihood destroyed is traumatizing and can fuel further conflict and cycles of fighting and destruction. Economic despair is one reason to include practical avenues for improved livelihoods in a community-based peacebuilding approach.

In this case, the scope and nature of the economic results of the savings groups were typical of what is reported in the associated literature. 15-25 participants create economic and social assets by saving together and borrowing from one another (creating member owned financial services). After one year of saving together, the group refunds individual savings back to its individual members plus a proportional percentage of earned interest. Either through accumulation of savings or through access to loans, participants have the capital to start new businesses. To facilitate enterprise development, participants also receive training in micro and small enterprise development, thus providing a way for families both to provide for themselves and to invest further. In this project, initial baseline surveys indicated that 55% of respondents had an income generation activity. Furthermore, only 8% of respondents reported having any kind of productive asset (something reusable to help them generate an income). Roughly three years later, 90% of the 2,568 survey respondents reported starting or expanding a business as a result of participation in a savings group—an increase of 45%. A further 55% of the 2,568 participants reported owning a productive asset—an increase of 47%. As is standard practice for savings groups, financing for the business or asset acquisition could come either from borrowing from the group or using the lump sum provided at the group share-out.

Importantly for people in conflict situations, economic recovery permits them to support themselves through their own efforts, thus providing hope and a counter narrative to economic despair.<sup>4</sup> As one

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<sup>4</sup> C. R. Snyder et al. proposed that hope is a cognitive behavioural process versus an emotion. That hope came from having a goal, a pathway to achieve that goal and a sense of agency or “I can do this” (1991). Savings groups meet these criteria for creating hope.

displaced member from Bor, who now lives in the Shirkat community outside of Juba said,

All of us, we have come from Bor in 2020 when the floods were terrible. We came to Juba with nothing. All of my things were swallowed by water—my clothes, all of the food in our granary, my house. It is only because of this (savings) box where we save our money that we have coped. We have come together and through one another's support is how I have paid school fees for my children and survived. I took a small loan of 200,000 SSP and I used it to start a small business making mandazi. I don't even know how this small business pays for our needs, but we manage day by day and have rebuilt our lives (Savings Group member, June 6, 2024).

Additionally, individual potential for economic agency and prosperity is clearly affected by war and trauma. People who are traumatized often feel overwhelmed by their pain, whether expressed through hopelessness, helplessness, anger, withdrawal, and apathy. Responses like these affect one's capacity to make changes in their own lives, including the ability to provide for their families. Being trauma-informed means recognizing that people may need new livelihood opportunities to grow into community-based peacebuilding activities. In this sense, consideration needs to be given to how traumatic events affect people's economic agency and entrepreneurialism but also how leveraging agency through entrepreneurialism helps people to experience hope and even healing from trauma.

### ***Building Trust***

Second, trust in communities is severely affected by war and conflict. Mistrust is a commonly cited impact of trauma in South Sudan, one that works on and shapes people's perceptions and understanding of others' motivations (USAID 2019). In the context of widespread mistrust, being trauma-informed means recognizing that small misunderstandings can grow into violent conflict, and this is especially true when members of a community have been victimized by others in the community. If groups are mobilized out of this context of mistrust for any economic or developmental purpose—such as group farming initiatives, microenterprise development, or community-based microfinance—the problems with trust and people's inability to collaborate, can spill over

into groups and their dynamics. Rather than try to bury what is uncomfortable or divisive, the group platform provides opportunities for positive interaction and healing required for real cooperation.<sup>5</sup> This is also how groups exercise everyday peace.

As Gordon Allport points out, if well-facilitated, contact among different groups of people can have positive effects on the respective group members by breaking down negative perceptions and stereotypes of the other group (as cited in Pettigrew and Tropp 2005). Indeed, International Alert notes that “Bringing people face-to-face, within and across communities to jointly plan, design and implement processes [intergroup contact] is the cornerstone of peacebuilding” (2020, 5). Savings groups in South Sudan apply this idea by bringing people together as equals within a group; they have a common, practical goal that they are cooperating towards—savings group management and livelihood development—and they are supported by the local church and Mothers' Union as respected local institutions in their efforts. In Renk, for example, 70.8% of savings groups had more than one ethnic group represented and interacting within the group-based platform. In Juba, among savings groups composed of displaced people, there is an average of more than four ethnic groups represented in one savings group.

At a minimum, this means that groups meeting together on a regular basis is a form of building everyday peace for the individual members. This happens through exposure to the other, breaking down barriers of mistrust and prejudice, and creating a platform for trusted engagement, reconciliation, healing, and solidarity to take place. This building of trust is relationally and economically significant for group members themselves as trust and peaceful cooperation is the foundation of savings groups. Members, for example, are not likely to provide loan capital to one another if they cannot trust each other to repay. As one Renk program trainer remarked, “the members will not trust each other unless we do something to bring people together.” Cooperation in groups also demonstrates to others in the community that it is possible and productive to work together, even among those who may formerly have been in conflict. Membership in a savings group is then an example of everyday peacebuilding in a group and at the community level as it incentivizes a group's capacity to calm conflict and provides an example of the value of doing so to others in a community.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This idea also links with John Paul Lederach's idea of creating platforms or social spaces for peace and social change to take place once peace accords have been signed in post conflict areas (see Lederach 2005, 47-49).

<sup>6</sup> A similar positive impact of savings group on reducing conflict and increasing peacebuilding in South Sudan was noted in a recent report by CARE Netherland (Whipkey 2021).

## **Conclusion: Conflict, Peace, and Trauma-Informed Savings Groups**

How we define peace and conflict matters. Our working definitions influence how and in what ways we work with conflict and towards peace (Brock-Utne 1989). In peacebuilding literature, there is a longstanding differentiation made between negative and positive peace. Negative peace is the absence of physical violence, but structural and cultural violence in different forms such as poverty, racism and sexism may very well still be present (Galtung 1969). If peace is defined as an absence of armed conflict brokered by the international community and multilateral actors, then peace becomes something external and one dimensional that is imposed or received. While recognizing that there is good motivation in working towards peace with the support of the multilateral community, this definition can feel disempowering and inaccessible to many because there is a service provision element to it. Some people get it and maintain it, while others do not.

Positive peace, on the other hand, is the absence of physical violence in the presence of increasing social justice (Galtung 1969). Positive peace considers the attitudes, institutions, and structures that create and sustain peaceful societies (Institute for Economics and Peace 2020). As a concept, the idea of positive peace is holistic and seems similar to biblical shalom. Nicholas Wolterstoff says that

In shalom, each person enjoys justice, enjoys his or her rights. There is no shalom without justice. But shalom goes beyond justice. Shalom is the human being dwelling at peace in all his or her relationships... But the peace which is shalom is not merely the absence of hostility, not merely being in right relationship. Shalom at its highest is enjoyment in one's relationships... To dwell in shalom is to enjoy living before God, to enjoy living in one's physical surroundings, to enjoy living with one's fellows, to enjoy life with oneself (1983, 69).

The Mothers' Union and ECSS provide an example of how the local church in South Sudan is not satisfied with the limitations and fragility of top-down negative peace. It recognises that shalom, likened to positive peace, has a highly practical and experiential element to it. While pursuing shalom does not exclude the cessation of violence that comes through high-level negotiations, it also includes personal relationships, meeting physical needs as well as emotional and spiritual needs. In addition to ending violence, moving towards shalom as a peacebuilding ministry of the local church points toward long term social, economic, and spiritual wellbeing of all God's image bearers.

Taking this into account, it is clear that South Sudan is in a state of negative peace, and even that continues to break down. A peace agreement was brokered and signed in partnership with the international and multilateral communities. Yet there has been no real reconciliation between people. There is little trust between ethnic groups and the threat of violence is ongoing—in response to even the smallest stimuli. So, while the peace agreement has brought periods of reduced violence over the last nine years, it is impossible to say that South Sudan is at peace.

Conflict, on the other hand, can be understood as "...an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals" (Hocker and Wilmot 2018, 3). This is a purposefully broad definition because there are many forms of conflict. Conflicts may be interpersonal, intra-group, inter-group, intra-national, international, or a combination of these. In the above definition, the words "expressed," "perceive," and "incompatible" are emphasized. How people perceive each other, including their character and intentions, as well as the degree to which they believe their goals are compatible can shape how they understand conflict. Moreover, looking through a community lens reveals inconsistencies in common assumptions about peace and conflict. At the community level, people's lived experiences show that peace and conflict do not exist in absolute states (Boulding 2000); rather, they co-exist all the time. The goal of peacebuilding is not to eradicate conflict and experience only peace, as such a goal is not possible or even productive.

This is particularly true in South Sudan, and it is exemplified in the project of Mothers' Union of the Episcopal Church of South Sudan in partnership with Five Talents. Their trauma-informed peacebuilding and savings group methodology shows how addressing conflict and trauma can contribute to the pursuit of shalom and/or "everyday peace" even amid ongoing conflict. I suggest four reasons for this:

1. It connects personal reflection on traumatic experiences with agency and action, leading to community-level advocacy and opportunities for everyday peace.
2. It helps participants learn to identify and cope with their trauma through integrated trauma healing and peer to peer counselling.
3. It builds trust through intergroup contact.
4. It provides a counternarrative to economic despair through new livelihood opportunities.

In sum, the work of building positive peace in both South Sudan and other countries in similar situations is

ongoing, and actors at local, regional, national, and international levels, especially those connected with the local church, are leading the way in looking for the best ways to do that. May the international community pay close attention to and learn from their experiences, supporting local efforts instead of imposing top-down negative peace.

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