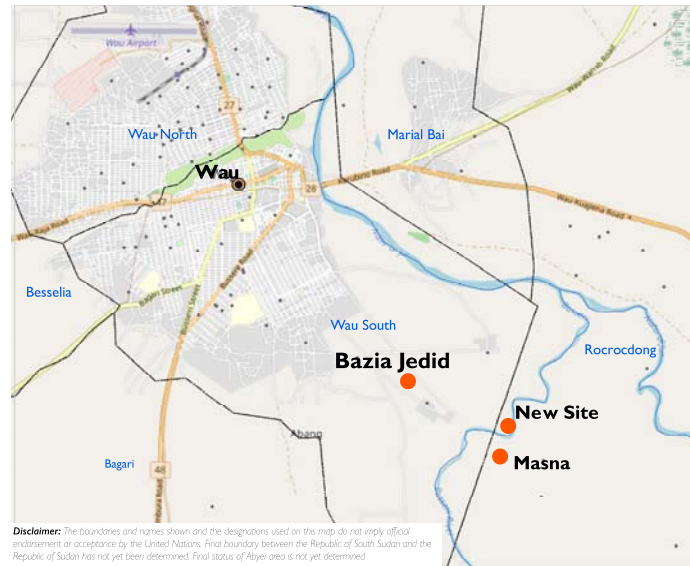


From Gang Members to Peace Promoters: How Youth Gangs in Wau are Transforming to be Champions of Peace and Social Cohesion in their Communities

Background

Protracted conflict in South Sudan has led to severe underdevelopment, fractionalized communities, weakened social cohesion and stifled socio-economic recovery from shocks associated with conflict, natural hazards and disease. Despite the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) on 12 September 2018 and the formation of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), populations are still grappling with instability, including rising food insecurity and sharp economic declines. Incomes have been on the decline and many small businesses have collapsed, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is particularly accurate for the country’s young people whose lives continue to be marked by violence and exclusion, unable to realize their aspirations on account of the deteriorating socio-economic situation and wider structural inequalities that persist.



Disclaimer: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations. Final boundary between the Republic of South Sudan and the Republic of Sudan has not yet been determined. Final status of Abyei area is not yet determined.

Wau Town Map

Unsure how youth relate to broader nation and state-building projects in the country and sidelined from decision-making that invariably impacts their future, young people are caught between the competing pressures of wanting to shape their own path forward and political, social and economic systems that continue to marginalize them, treating them as threats of community life. In this setting, youth gangs and other violent groups are one of the few avenues through which young people in urban areas can gain a sense of belonging and inclusion, pushing many young people into a life of violence and crime.

In Wau Town, these youth gangs are blamed for rising crime, including assault, theft of property, the spread of illegal drugs and damage to private and public property, targeting urban poor communities, including internally displaced persons (IDPs) and presenting a threat to the creation of a conducive environment for the eventual realization of durable solutions in a place that has the potential to be pocket of resilience recovery. In fact, participants in focus group discussions carried in 2019 in Wau cited insecurity as a major factor that continues to inhibit sustainable returns and pointed at young men’s criminality and juvenile delinquency as one of the driving forces of insecurity and fear amongst Wau Town’s residents. According to an IOM¹ survey conducted in 2018, 67-77 % of respondents from Hai Bazia and New Site in Wau Town have been affected by insecurity.

The UN The Secretary General’s Peacebuilding Fund supports youth action to reduce violence and enhance social cohesion in Wau

Project partners engage young people to facilitate a process of transformation of young people involved in violent and criminal youth gangs in Wau town. The project addresses complex social and peacebuilding challenges by:

- Deploying mental and psychosocial support to help address emotional distress and strengthen youth positive coping capabilities at individual, family, and community levels.
- Supporting youth positive social and economic engagement in their communities.
- Supporting transformation of community perceptions towards the youth, breaking stigmatization, and enhancing youth participation in decision-making processes.

¹. Displacement tracking matrix 2018



A youth speaking during a community consultation meeting in Wau © IOM 2021

Achievements & Results

- **171** young people have worked on enhancing their self-understanding, leading to a more positive self-image, better communications skills, and enhanced ability to manage daily stress. An additional group of **87** young people have improved family relationships in some cases leading to re-unification of families.
- Through socio-economic programmes, **407** young people have acquired varied vocational and business skills. **103** young people deployed vocational skills gained in self-employment or in job opportunities in their relevant sectors and **304** young people were provided with start-up kits engaged in small business enterprises. Economic inter-action and growing inter-dependencies have led to a reduction of violent and adversarial inter-group relationships.
- **250** young people graduated through the project's Functional Adult Literacy programme that provides basic literacy, computing and business skills.
- Additionally, through the project, **mutual understanding, mutual trust and better relationship significantly improved** between youth gangs, community, and local authorities. Relevant government entities and local leaders developed keen interests in project work with youth gangs, with a request for IOM/UNESCO to share lessons learned and approaches used for possible application by other stakeholders
- **45 youth gang groups expressed strong commitment to abandon criminality** and to contribute positively to society well-being. **Five (5) youth gangs** have so far reconstituted and registered themselves as Self-Help Groups
- Through radio outreach, sports events, and theatre performance **the youth gangs reached over 15,000 community members with peace, reconciliation and social cohesion promotion** interventions resulting in improved community perception towards the youth.
- In recognition of critical results realized and existing potential of the project to further deepen the impact on young people and positive peacebuilding impact, the UN Peacebuilding Fund has requested the project is continued beyond its initial funding and duration. Project interventions in 2021-2022 will strengthen inclusion and decision making processes for young people through engagement with the newly constituted state Government, increase participation of youth gang group members in the local economy, and support public good projects for the benefit of the community.

The project is jointly implemented by IOM (lead), and UNESCO in partnership with Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports (MoCYS), Ministry of Peacebuilding, and civil society organisations: Community Empowerment for Progress Organization (CEPO) Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), Women Advancement Organization (WAO), Inclusive Education and Development Initiative (IEDI), Support for Peace and Education Development (SPEDP), Action for Development (AFOD).

The project is funded by the United Nations Secretary General's Peacebuilding Fund under the Gender and Youth Promotion Initiative 2018. The project duration was 18 months from January 2019-May 2021 and has been extended by an additional 12 months until September 2022.