

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Community self-protection, public authority and the safety of strangers in Bor and Ler, South Sudan

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## Funding information

Arts and Humanities Research Council, Grant/Award Number: AH/T007524/1

## Abstract

Protection is not simply something done or delivered to people by states, humanitarian organisations and armed peacekeepers. Instead, a growing literature has begun to examine the self-protection strategies of people and communities in protracted violent crises. Its authors suggest that nuanced understandings of how people retain a measure of agency in the face of violence is an important first step for those seeking to reduce their levels of threat and vulnerability. We use interview data from communities in Bor and Ler, South Sudan, long affected by conflict, to show how attention to the relationship between public authority and the safety of strangers can reveal the skills, resources and conditions under which protection is successfully provided. This also helps to re-root 'protection' in local vernaculars that more closely resemble its everyday use among South Sudanese and offers entry points for humanitarian interventions with more realistic prospects of positive outcomes for communities sceptical of humanitarians' broken promises to protect.

## 1 | PROTECTION IN PROTRACTED VIOLENT CRISES

Our communities have been running for safety and protection for many years from conflicts, hunger, floods and famine. So, every member of any generation has a story of safety and protection to tell.

(Chief, Bor County, South Sudan, 2021)

In South Sudan, as in other protracted violent crises, citizens and communities have refined strategies for staying safe. In such places, researchers have documented how civilians survive, and protect themselves and others, to varying degrees without much in the way of help from the state or international community (Gorur & Carstensen, 2016; Kaplan, 2017; Mayersen, 2020; South, 2010; Suarez, 2017). This literature challenges mainstream depictions of them as the recipients of aid or as beneficiaries, refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs) and victims, and, instead, foregrounds their agency. Yet, it also asks

humanitarian organisations to recognise the limits of what they can do and urges them to rethink how they can support the reduction of threats and vulnerabilities in ways that, at the very least, do no harm. This low bar is a tacit recognition that peacekeepers and humanitarians' claims to protect have unduly raised expectations and, too often, had negative consequences for those they try to help (Bonwick, 2006; DuBois, 2009; South et al., 2012).

In this article, we build on and advance this literature by paying attention to the micro politics and claims of authority that are entangled with self- and community-protection strategies. We show that the provision of protection is a way to build authority in protracted violent crises especially when neither states nor humanitarians are the primary actors providing this public good. We argue that the focus in the literature on the dichotomy between humanitarian and self- or community-protection strategies, or on whether protection is militarised or not, is not necessarily useful. Rather, we should pay attention to whether protection provision builds inclusive modes of governance and has the

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potential to break cycles of violence. Throughout we use the concept of 'public authority' to draw attention to the full range of actors and institutions that claim legitimacy and power in protracted violent crises (Hoffmann & Kirk, 2013; Lund, 2006).

International policy discussions of protection have largely focused on states' responsibilities to protect, and, failing this, the role of mandated humanitarian missions and international organisations that claim to provide protection when they won't. 'Public authority' is a useful concept for exploring this field as, firstly, it helps us notice that a range of institutions and actors beyond these actors often claim legitimacy and power by providing public goods such as safety and protection. This draws our attention to the micro politics of protracted crises and reveals the skills, resources, and conditions under which protection is provided. Secondly, it asks us to investigate who are included and excluded from such processes and what this may be for wider goals such as rights, peace and development (Kirk & Allen, 2021). We conclude that such sensitivities can uncover possible entry points for humanitarian activities that may have more realistic chances of supporting communities sceptical of outsiders' broken promises to protect.

To do this, we draw upon ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews with forty-nine respondents from Ler County (Unity State) and Bor County (Jonglei State) over late 2021 and early 2022. Interviews were designed and overseen by the article's authors and had support from three other South Sudanese researchers (one male and two female) who were living in the studied regions.<sup>1</sup> One of the authors was born and had recently lived in Greater Bor, where he maintains close familial relations. Another of the authors spent considerable time in Greater Ler and has conducted research in South Sudan throughout the last decade.

The interviewees mainly consisted of public authorities: chiefs, sub-chiefs, elders, youth leaders, non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers and six women's leaders. They were chosen as South Sudan's chieftainship system remains the primary organiser for communal life, despite new forms of public authority arising as a result of violence and development (Idris, 2017; Pendle, 2021). Chiefs settle disputes, resolve conflicts, collect taxes, allocate aid, and act as intermediaries between the government and communities. They can also mobilise community members for development projects. Under the Local Government Act of 2009, chiefs were given a semi-autonomous status and mandated to engage in many of these activities.

Day-to-day, chiefs, who may not always be present in rural communities, often govern through various other types of leaders, from male (sometimes called headmen) and female elders to youth leaders. Due to the protracted crisis, failures of the state and the resources they can accrue, those employed by NGOs also often occupy governance roles in South Sudanese

communities. They are intimately familiar with local politics and public authority structures due to the need to negotiate humanitarian access and development projects (Moro et al., 2020). Beyond these interviewees, the researchers also observed protection practices in the studied areas during the period of research.

Our analysis pays attention to public authorities' roles in governing protection in the short- and long- term, how such processes can be inclusive or exclusive, and what they might mean for reducing immediate threats and preventing cycles of violence. We also focus on the skills, resources, and conditions under which self-protection strategies are successful, and why despite years of violence, political manipulation and entrenched animosities, some communities still protect strangers. We show that over time social norms associated with conflict, protection and building legitimate authority have changed, resulting in some self-protection strategies that may ultimately perpetuate cycles of violence and others that seek to prevent them. Our analysis helps to further shift protection away from its conceptualisation among humanitarians as a top-down service or activity, and to re-root it in local vernaculars that view it as intimately connected to contests over power and authority. This is vital if repeated calls to support communities' own agency are to be realised.

Before presenting our findings, the article's next section introduces South Sudan's protracted crisis and further explores the existing research on self-protection strategies. We then turn to our data from Bor and Ler that show how protection is intimately linked to public authority. We finish with recommendations for practitioners seeking to support inclusive strategies.

## 2 | THE FAILURE TO PROTECT IN SOUTH SUDAN

Recent interest in the self-protection of those caught in protracted crises has led to frameworks and typologies. One much cited example uses research from northern Uganda to identify the strategies civilians used at different stages of the region's insurgency from the late 1980s to early 2000s (Baines & Paddon, 2012). They variously engaged in attempts to remain neutral, efforts to avoid belligerents and accommodations that would temper their violent attentions. A more recent framework reviews self-protection studies and uses data from refugees in Botswana and Ghana (Jose & Medie, 2015). Its authors discern three primary, yet often overlapping, categories of self-protection strategies against immediate, direct threats: non-engagement, non-violent engagement and violent engagement. The third category recognises that actively supporting armed groups or physically defending oneself are often locally legitimate forms of self-protection, even if they are far from humanitarian organisations' principles.

Our research expands and challenges these frameworks by centring the protection roles played by public authorities, with a particular focus on how they seek to prevent disputes escalating into dangerous cycles of violence and hunger. It suggests that how they govern self- and community-protection strategies is especially important given South Sudan's militarised and interdependent inter-communal and national politics. Moreover, it is vital for understanding the conditions under which people are included or excluded from protection provided by actors other than the state and humanitarian organisations.

South Sudanese have faced brutal and arbitrary violence for over a hundred years as governments and foreign forces have tried to secure control over resources and power. Examples of abuses against them are seemingly endless, including: colonial era British officials in the 1920s burning whole villages as collective punishment for resistance to their rule (Johnson, 2016; Pendle, 2017); Sudanese forces rounding up and killing civilians in the 1960s at the outbreak of the Anya-Nya war (Cormack, 2014: 201–211); and attacks on civilians by the Sudanese army, militia and community defence forces during the second civil war from 1983 to 2005 (Johnson, 2003; Jok, 2017a).

In 2013, soon after South Sudan gained independence in 2011, the army violently fractured based on entrenched divisions between different factions in the wars of the 1990s and early 2000s. The targeting of civilians in Juba in 2013 by pro-government forces prompted revenge attacks against the government in regions across South Sudan (Pendle, 2020a). Over the following decade, and despite peace agreements, the conflict geographically spread. During these wars civilians have been repeatedly targeted (UNMISS and UNHRC, 2022).

Successive governments – whom under international law have the responsibility – have failed to protect South Sudan's civilians and have themselves sometimes been the perpetrators of violence (Akoi, 2021). Even during periods of apparent 'peace', South Sudanese civilians have remained under significant threat of violence, whether it be meted out by foreign interlopers, the state, those in opposition to it, criminals, rival communities or peacekeepers (HRC, 2021; Watson, 2019). People's experiences of violence have also differed by gender, with displacement and sexual violence used as weapons against both sexes to varying degrees (Oosterom, 2014). Over time, changing patterns of violence and community-level recruitment into local defence forces has redefined what it means to be a civilian in South Sudan, and who are legitimate targets in war is still debated by all sides (Kindersley & Rolandsen, 2019; Pendle, 2021).

Confronted by atrocities, the region and its people have been the testing ground for protection innovations

by humanitarian organisations and peacekeepers. These have included new refugee practices from the 1970s, the provision of assistance in rebel-controlled areas from the late 1980s, and the UN's Protection of Civilian sites (PoC sites) dotted around the county since 2013 (Hering, 2020; Ibreck & Pendle, 2017; Kilroy, 2018). Such practices were encouraged by the international community's increased interest in protection over the 1990s, and the normative blending of international humanitarian law with doctrines supporting armed interventions and human rights discourses (Claire, 2019). Yet, they have largely failed to achieve their stated aims due to poor implementation, a lack of resources and an unwillingness to put humanitarians and peacekeepers in harm's way. Furthermore, accusations of perverse motives and bias among those purporting to offer protection, combined with the manipulation of their initiatives by public authorities and belligerents, have heightened insecurity in some cases (Craze, 2021; Marriage, 2006).

Research has shown how South Sudanese communities have developed a range of non-violent self-protection strategies in response to this history. For example, Janguan and Kirk's (2023) article in this special issue describes how individuals choose 'silence' – understood as avoiding any political conversations – and hide their ethnic identities in public so as not draw authorities' violent attention. Whilst others have documented how women appeal to men's moral responsibility to protect them and their children by reinforcing prevailing ideas of masculinity (Oosterom, 2014). However, both strategies can have a detrimental impact on freedoms and equity as people limit themselves to stay safe.

Alongside this, research has shown how by drawing on spiritual powers some South Sudanese are able to gain a voice with which to contest militarised notions of protection and sovereignty, and the often-implicit claims to impunity made by armed actors (Hutchison & Pendle, 2015; Pendle, 2023). It also documents how certain spaces and landscapes have become associated and remade into spaces of safety and protection, or danger, depending on local circumstances (Cormack, 2014; Pendle, 2017). For example, specific buildings within which violence is morally prohibited, such as houses, spiritual authorities' *luaks* (cattle byres) and churches, are associated with safety. Novels have added to this literature with detailed accounts of individuals' and families' dramatic experiences of fleeing violence for such places (Deng, 2020; Jal, 2010).

As found elsewhere, South Sudanese self-protection strategies also encompass public authorities negotiating with, and acquiescing to the demands of, armed groups (Leonardi, 2015). For example, chiefs have collected taxes for belligerents to prevent arbitrary attacks and looting against their communities (Anei & Pendle, 2018). Whilst this can avert violence, such

strategies are often adopted under duress, incentivising further predation. Communities have also negotiated with armed groups to promote and enforce pro-civilian codes of restraint that are constantly evolving and being contested (Pendle, 2021). These activities have obvious parallels with the work done by humanitarians to promote human rights and international humanitarian law.

In addition, self-protection strategies can involve public authorities mobilising local, lightly armed protection forces, usually comprised of youth, from among communities. For example, the informal groups known as the 'arrow boys' emerged in the mid-2000s in Western Equatoria State in response to civilian attacks by Lords' Resistance Army fighters that had fled across the border with Uganda (Schomerus & Charles, 2017). Similarly, the *Titweng* (meaning 'cattle guards'), *Gelweng* (meaning 'cattle protectors'), White Armies and other informal pastoralist armed militia groups with their origins in Sudan's second civil war have all claimed themselves to be committed to community defence and protection (Arnold & Alden, 2007; Pendle, 2015; Stringham & Forney, 2017). As Jok has described, such forces evoke historical patterns of community mobilisation and spiritual protection with adaptations to contemporary militarised contexts (Jok, 2017b). That many of them are exclusionary and prone to predation, offensive attacks and human rights abuses have not gone unnoticed. Moreover, they often have close relationships with government or rebel forces to secure resources, weapons and intelligence, thereby, further blurring the lines between community members, self-protection strategies and belligerents (Kindersley & Rolandsen, 2019; Pendle, 2015).

The wider literature on South Sudan has also presented community-based justice mechanisms as self-protection strategies (Ibreck, 2019; Ibreck & Pendle, 2017; Pendle, 2020b; South et al., 2012). When successful, they can deter violent vigilantism and revenge attacks – or cycles of violence – that could spiral into larger clashes and attract the attention of powerful political actors that take advantage of local conflicts to advance their own ends. Furthermore, these practices enhance community cohesion and enable public authorities to legitimately govern, thereby, building communities' resilience and restraint. This includes inside PoC sites where humanitarian authorities have been relatively powerless to stop unrest and leaders have emerged to ensure people's safety (Ibreck & Pendle, 2017; Rhoads & Sutton, 2020).

The use of ethnographic methods in this literature accords with calls for research to uncover how individuals and communities understand (in)security and self-protection in their own vernacular (Glawion, 2020; Luckham & Kirk, 2013; Rudnick & Boromisza-Habashi, 2017). This challenges reductive portrayals of protection and self-protection as either about the

creation of social orders or the fulfilment of globally defined entitlements and rights, and enables analyses grounded in communities' own social norms and practices. Such approaches ask who is protected, from whom or what, and by what means, whilst viewing security and protection as politically contested public goods with, often troubled, relationships to power and authority. In the process, the 'dynamic and complex processes through which individuals and communities survive armed conflict demonstrates the limitations of [the] fixed categories and boundaries' academics and practitioners use (Suarez & Black, 2014). This, we argue, is crucial if the humanitarian organisations are to engage the public authorities – from traditional and business leaders to NGOs and politicians – that govern communities' self-protection strategies in the absence of able or willing states.

### 3 | PUBLIC AUTHORITY AND PROTECTION STRATEGIES

Beginning with brief contextual information, this section explores our research findings from communities in Bor County (Jonglei State) in the south of South Sudan and Ler County (Unity State) in the north. Communities in Ler are predominantly Nuer and in Bor, Dinka. In the years of war since 2013, Greater Bor has been largely government controlled. In contrast, the majority of Ler County was controlled for the war years by the armed opposition (the SPLA-IO), with the exception of Ler Town which remained in the hands of the government.

In both counties, livelihoods were historically dominated by agro-pastoralism, fishing and the small-scale trade of subsistence goods. However, war, displacement and marketisation have dramatically shifted local economies, especially in and around Bor (Thomas, 2015). Larger scale businessmen have emerged around Bor Town and Juba, including those who specialise in the sale and movement of cattle. From Ler there is not only a substantial trade in cattle overland to the north but also to the south along the Nile and through Bor. Whilst people in both counties retain traditional religious beliefs, many have also taken up Christianity and Islam. Those who have spent time in education or urban centres speak English and/or Arabic alongside Nuer and Dinka. Both counties have limited roads and suffer from flooding for much of the year, making it hard to travel or reach urban areas where government offices tend to be located.

In Bor County, the state mainly exercises its role as a protective public authority from Bor Town and through police stations located in rural areas. In reality, however, the stations are rarely staffed, officers are poorly equipped and their salaries often unpaid. This means people turn to public authorities such as chiefs and humanitarians when seeking protection. Indeed, they are



widely understood to be more trusted than the government, and they remain present in the villages where most of the population resides. In heavily militarised Ler County, the few police are also poorly equipped and often unpaid, and they have almost no power to confront soldiers or local armed youth that are the main threat to civilians. Chiefs in this area are seen as part of the government system but are still turned to for protection (Pendle, 2023). Nuer prophets – local religious actors – are also seen as protection providers by some parts of the community. Both counties have long histories, since the 1990s, of humanitarian intervention. However, post-2013 fighting forced many of Ler's NGOs out of urban hubs and into rural areas such as Thonyor and Tociak. The presence of humanitarians increased again during extreme food insecurity in South Sudan from 2015.

In both counties, protection and safety were spoken of interchangeably by members of the studied communities. Almost no-one, apart from humanitarian workers, explicitly evoked ideas of rights in relation to protection. Protection and safety were primarily understood as about preventing incidences and cycles of violence and their consequences. Nonetheless, many also cited food security and, some, diseases and flooding as threats to protect against. Regarding violence, the aim was to prevent people from engaging in actions that could lead to wider conflicts and endanger others, or to stop people who threatened immediate violence. As one interviewee put it: 'Safety and protection mean avoiding doing or engaging in any activities that would endanger the wellbeing of the person and community'.<sup>2</sup>

These needs framed our discussions of protection. They were present in descriptions of how individual community members should conduct themselves in times of relative peace or when fleeing, in how public authorities should govern and protect them, and in how fighting as a form of self-protection should be conducted. They also shaped who should be protected, when and how.

### 3.1 | Individual strategies and local knowledge

Interviewees revealed that even in times of relative peace they engage in a variety of everyday self-protection strategies. Strategies included never moving about alone, accompanying women in public, keeping dogs as guards, hanging around the home to deter violent robberies, keeping the surrounding area clear of tall grass so attackers can easily be spotted, older youth looking out for strangers' footprints and owning weapons. Some rural communities build houses closer together for safety even though it would have been more convenient to be dispersed and closer to the land each farmed. However, there was widespread concern

that such efforts were diverting people from farming: '... young people in the villages, in communities, are spending time trying to protect their villages instead of farming or engaging in activities that will give them incomes'.<sup>3</sup> Such trade-offs linked physical and food security in the discourses of many interviewees.

Individuals fleeing conflict argued that they draw upon years of experience of surviving in difficult situations. For example, in Ler, people recounted how they have learnt to turn plastic sheets, distributed by humanitarian organisations for shelter, into rafts by tying the corners. During an offensive in Tochriak in March 2022, one of our team members observed how this allowed children, the elderly and precious belongings to be carried through chest-high water as armed actors advanced on the community.<sup>4</sup> Having hard-learned knowledge such as this is key for safety. Accordingly, community members regularly share information about which islands, swamps or forests might provide protection and sustenance.<sup>5</sup> People intentionally buy small non-smart phones as their batteries last longer in the remote places they flee to and make sure to carry plastic bags to keep them dry in the damp environments they must move through.<sup>6</sup> In such times, knowledge of passable terrain and likely weather patterns are as valued as intelligence concerning the movements of armed groups. As an interviewee put it:

... in the villages people always have places that are only known to the those in that community. Places where people can hide when the enemy over power them. These places cannot be found by the enemy no matter what. Sometimes people will gather and agree on where to go or how to defend the community. Living together, fighting together and even planning defences together have always been the way of providing safety and protection across our communities.<sup>7</sup>

Conducting similar research in northern Uganda, Baines and Paddon (2012) found such information to be central to self-protection. This information must sometimes be provided in the heat of violence and predictions can be wrong. In Ler, while fleeing from the aforementioned attacks, there was not a consensus among community members about where to move to and some people were killed when their paths accidentally crossed an armed group.

For the fortunate, having somewhere to flee to can mean a second home or relatives' residences across international borders or in refugee camps.<sup>8</sup> These have often been acquired following past dislocations and as a hedging strategy in the face of persistent uncertainty. This can necessitate a balancing act between nurturing vast networks of friends and family, and stockpiling

resources, that can be drawn upon in emergencies. Those less fortunate can opt to move towards nearby military actors to seek protection during outbreaks of violence. For example, a local NGO worker in Ler described how 'the community seek safety from the UN's Temporary Protection Area where they feel safe around the UN's soldiers'.<sup>9</sup> Many community members chose this site to flee to during recent offensives, but it only had capacity for 1000 people. Those denied access camped in and around a nearby market and NGO compounds where they felt seen by international actors. Despite the offensives being carried out by pro-government militias and armed youth, some also sought safety at a government military base.

Alongside such tangible strategies, the preservation of moral integrity can be vital when fleeing. One of our research team was caught among the communities fleeing the recent offensives in Ler. To move through the bush over the course of several weeks, he and his colleagues from a local humanitarian organisation relied on the help of community members. To ensure their moral integrity in the eyes of those helping them, they did not take the organisation's supplies of Plumpy'Nut (peanut-based paste often provided by humanitarian organisations to address acute malnutrition) with them as they fled. They feared being accused by community members of misappropriating food intended for them, even though they knew the advancing armed group would loot the stockpile (Dang, 2022).

### 3.2 | Leadership and governing protection

Previous research has shown how actors beyond the state, including Nuer prophets and NGO workers, provide protection to build their legitimacy as public authorities (Moro et al., 2020; Pendle, 2020b; Robinson, 2023). Our findings suggest similar dynamics occur at the community level, with chiefs, elders and those connected to the humanitarian system claiming power by providing protection. Nevertheless, some interviewees lamented what they saw as conflict induced societal changes. They were concerned about the secularisation of protection, the government's powerlessness to control crises, and the opaque goals and allegiances of the public authorities, especially newer chiefs, claiming to offer protection. As one elder argued: 'Today, the government does not have teeth and cannot bite...'<sup>10</sup>

Regarding secularisation, Greater Bor and Greater Ler provide contrasting examples in relation to the weakening of the importance of deities in protection. In Greater Bor, some described how in the past 'strong deities' could be called upon – through their human spokesperson – to help protect communities.<sup>11</sup> The deities would identify troublemakers and rouse public authorities to punish them, explain why crops were not

yielding and devise a communal response, and warn of impending attacks by outsiders and how to prevent them. Asked what happened to the deities, an interviewee explained:

... today, there are no deities, communities are not that much into them, people are put in jail and leaders don't have a strong influence over the people. Moving on, the sense of togetherness is weakened so no one cares about community anymore. It is an issue of individualism.<sup>12</sup>

He also confided that his community's deity had been 'burned' in the 2000s when people began turning to Christianity and, later, the new government for protection; something he regretted as they had both since been found wanting. The Anglican church grew significantly in Bor from the 1990s (Zink, 2018). In contrast, Ler County and Unity State has had a different religious history in recent decades. While the church has grown, many people still actively call on Nuer prophets and their ancestors for protection, and testify to their strength in providing support (Hutchinson & Pendle, 2015; Pendle, 2020b, 2023).

Among our interviewees, there was concern over the government's ability to provide protection. Some argued that respect for, and fear of, the government's laws had declined, especially among the youth.<sup>13</sup> They suggested that this has increased the chances that minor disputes will escalate into wider conflicts. This was variously attributed this to the state's limited resources, political manipulation and outsiders, and a break down in norms caused by modern education: 'These conflicts and changes in morals and values come from you educated people, you come with discrimination and something you called identity.'<sup>14</sup> Other new ideas argued to reduce community safety included shifting land laws, the division of productive land into plots that people connected to politicians fight over and, as discussed later, the need to violently take revenge for harms.<sup>15</sup>

For others, however, there was a notion that through education communities may better protect themselves and break cycles of violence.<sup>16</sup> The classroom was described as keeping young girls from danger and preventing young boys from becoming involved with gangs and criminality. As an interviewee argued:

When people in the cattle camps killed someone, those who are coming for revenge will kill anyone they find. But educated people fear violence because they know the laws will catch up with them. An educated person can save the whole society with their ideas. These are the reasons why we encourage the community to send children to school.<sup>17</sup>

Some interviewees also suggested that education, including that provided by humanitarian organisations, increases people's respect for women as they become viewed as rights holders and economically productive.<sup>18</sup> They pointed to awareness raising programmes implemented by humanitarians on gender-based violence, services for survivors and how police now took an interest in providing protection to vulnerable women. As a female community leader argued; 'Today, recognition of women in itself is a way of ensuring safety and protection, girls are allowed to join school so that they become independent and able to protect themselves'.<sup>19</sup>

The fear that minor social problems, usually related to inter-familial disputes, may escalate into wider conflicts was at the forefront of how public authorities, from elders to chiefs, provide self-protection and govern.<sup>20</sup> One suggested that their homes provide a bolthole for those that have transgressed social norms, such as eloping with a girl out of marriage or committing adultery.<sup>21</sup> This function was portrayed as important for preventing violent revenge by aggrieved families and allowing for a cooling off period before mediations began. Echoing Oosterom (2014), some interviewees also suggested older women provide protection by being the 'controllers of the family', mediating minor disputes before they are taken to elders, and cooking the food that unites communities.<sup>22</sup> Other public authorities, such as chiefs, declared that they had to stay vigilant and stop disputes before that could spiral: '... a leader is someone who anticipates issues that will result in conflict in the future and addresses them before these issues divide the community'.<sup>23</sup> Such vigilance extends to keeping abreast of intercommunal, national and international affairs that threaten peace.

When hunger and conflicts do arise, the ability to analyse the situation and to make decisive protection plans were seen as key facets of leadership: 'As a community elder, you have seen so many difficult things and have got experiences over time. [...] you assure the community and young people to be strong because bad times have come'.<sup>24</sup> Elders and chiefs can also use their authority to appropriate food, cattle and money from well stocked community members to share among the vulnerable. Similar practices have been noted in recent research on 'hunger courts' set up by chiefs to ensure food for the vulnerable during famines (Newton et al., 2021). At the same time, these redistributive efforts can be exclusionary as they focus on providing to those seen as being part of the community rather than simply anyone in need.

Interviewed public authorities described how when threatened they would instruct the youth how to defend the community.<sup>25</sup> This includes whether the ensuing fighting should only last long enough to allow others to flee to safety or whether there are wider goals such as the total defeat of an enemy, appropriation or

destruction of their property. Here, older authorities' years of experience are drawn upon to carefully weigh the grand strategy and various tactical considerations. Many argued that compared to past eras, they were now required to have knowledge of and respond to new threats arising from the militarisation of society, longer famines or more widespread flooding. Perhaps further indicative of a conceptual link between self-protection, violence and hunger, such deliberations were analogised to pastoral decision making: '... even when moving cattle from one cattle camp to another you first assess that next camp, the availability of grass, water, lack of cattle diseases'.<sup>26</sup>

It was agreed that personal resources and extra-local connections make it easier to provide protection. When fleeing violence, money must be found for transportation, such as boats to cross swamps and rivers, cars and even plane tickets. People call distant relatives in the capital or abroad for financial help. Whilst others described receiving aid from connected community members as an obligation.<sup>27</sup> One interviewee told of consequences for those that refused, including people composing derogatory songs about them or the drying up of successful marriage proposals for family members.<sup>28</sup> Those connected to the government were said to be key to such protection strategies, including when seeking assistance from humanitarians. As one community elder described; 'If we find out, for example, that people are hungry, we will inform the chiefs and the chiefs will talk to the government and the government will talk to UN. It is always a chain. Sometimes no single person is tasked with safety and protection'.<sup>29</sup>

As touched upon earlier, the UN has become part of the landscape of South Sudan's protracted violent conflict and, thereby, is entangled with people's protection strategies. As one Chief in Bor said; 'UN protection sites are safer and people trust it because UN has protection soldiers'.<sup>30</sup> The neutrality of the UN, and its lack of social and familial connections, was also seen as a reason to trust them. At the same time, especially in Bor, some interviewees argued that the UN's peace-keeping project was exclusionary as it was perceived to focus on the protection of specific communities over others, such as the Nuer. Interviewees also lamented that humanitarians needed money, plans and permissions from headquarters to provide protection and were, thereby, slow to act. This meant that in times of real crisis it was more likely to be other community members and their leaders that they looked to for immediate protection.

### 3.3 | Militarised protection and the safety of strangers

The importance of weapons in the region's militarised politics has been well documented in the wider literature

and our interviewees reconfirmed that despite disarmament initiatives they remain a primary self-protection strategy (Hutchinson, 1996; Wild et al., 2018). This included the importance community members acquiring and displaying arms. In Ler, for example, an interviewee described how; 'People have got guns in their homes for protecting the community'.<sup>31</sup> Whilst in Bor, a Chief outlined how; 'The civil population carries small arms and this is for self-protection'.<sup>32</sup> Another stated; 'The youth are their only hope for protection and they are always armed with guns'.<sup>33</sup> In a notable example of the perceived protective power of guns, a Chief recounted how he instructed youth to repeatedly walk past visitors from another community carrying the single gun he had to fool them into thinking the community was heavily armed, thereby, dissuading any plans to raid them they might have had.

When under threat, community members with access and the training to use guns will sometimes abscond from the national army or other armed groups to protect their community. Despite this, guns remain expensive acquisitions for civilians so many suggested that they are provided by contacts in Juba with significant resources. These contacts were described as businessmen, politicians and commanders. Indeed, all had positions within South Sudan's 'military aristocracy', and most were spoken about with some level of discretion (Pinaud, 2014).

Although fighting was portrayed as a legitimate – and sometimes the only – self-protection strategy for threatened communities, as with respect for wider norms and laws, a feeling of loss pervaded these discussions, reinforcing observations since the 1990s (Jok & Hutchinson, 1999; Pendle, 2021). Multiple interviewees described how in the past there were widespread 'taboos' against killing certain categories of people.<sup>34</sup> They included the vulnerable, such as women, children and the elderly, those fighters that had been wounded or surrendered, and public authorities from chiefs to spiritual leaders. Fighting was even said to only begin once the vulnerable were at a safe distance. There were also injunctions against killing those that were soon to be or had recently married, and against stealing or burning property. These restrictions were bound up with the idea that 'in the end the fighting will stop' and these codes would ensure communities were able to return to peace.<sup>35</sup>

Interviewees often contrasted the norms and rules of past eras with today's conflicts within which they are regularly transgressed, and a few guns can kill far more people, whether fighters or not, than sticks and spears. Moreover, they lamented that battles are often uncoordinated affairs, leaders find it harder to control armed youth and that powerful politicians were driving cycles of violence. Accordingly, a female leader suggested that it is now often up to wives to encourage restraint among their husbands that go to fight in the name of self-protection:

... we advise our husbands and youths not to commit crimes that break our norms during the war, they should not kill women, children, the elderly, or rape women. [...] The reason is that we carry our babies the same way the enemies' women carry their babies and that is why we refuse the killing of people that are helpless.<sup>36</sup>

At the same time, observations and interviews confirmed that, in certain circumstances, norms surrounding the safety of strangers still have power. For instance, during an attack in 2022 on communities in Ler County by youth from the nearby Koch County, women, children and the elderly were killed in significant numbers. In contrast, during simultaneous attacks elsewhere in Ler by Nuer from Mayendit County, youth showed significant restraint. As observed by our team member, they had ample opportunity to kill women, children and even armed men, yet they often limited themselves to harming those who resisted their attempts to loot property and cattle. These varying patterns of violence were argued to result from the different justifications given for mobilisation by public authorities overseeing the attackers, including chiefs and commissioners, and the historic relationships between the various communities. For example, people from Mayendit County were said to have closer relations, such as more inter-marriages, with people from Ler than those from Koch. A factor which has historically led to less severe conflicts and that enables youth to agree to more restrained forms of violence.

Some interviewed public authorities and community members also argued that strangers that seek protection will be kept safe. Not providing it would be a bad omen and likely prolong violence. To illustrate, a female leader from Bor recounted how women from her community had recently hidden a wounded Murle fighter from their husbands and nursed him back to health before helping him to escape. Others described protecting strangers as a source of 'blessing' and argued that 'protecting people increases the chances of peace because those who were protected become peace makers when they go back to their people'.<sup>37</sup> Reflecting on this practice, a male leader suggested that: 'protecting someone today might result in you being protected tomorrow'.<sup>38</sup>

Illustrative of this sentiment, during our research in Bor, Murle traders from Greater Pibor were killed as part of revenge for earlier attacks. On social media and in marketplace conversations in Bor, however, there was a high level of upset about the killings. Even people who supported offensives against communities in Pibor saw the traders' deaths as a transgression of prevalent protection norms and another sign of the entrenching of cycles of violence.<sup>39</sup>



## 4 | SUPPORTING PROTECTION STRATEGIES

The growth of humanitarian protection activities and their failure to keep civilians safe has not only prompted a critical literature but has also encouraged an emerging body of scholarship that takes seriously self- and community-protection strategies. This article used recent empirical research in Greater Ler and Bor, South Sudan, to add to it by detailing the protection practices carried out by individuals, communities and public authorities during times of conflict. It was shown that they often draw on decades of experiences of navigating safety in a challenging context, and on knowledge of local landscapes, armed actors, norms of restraint and violence, and the ability to secure the resources needed to protect oneself and others.

A focus on South Sudan's public authorities' roles in protection reveals how it is a contested public good on which they stake their claims to legitimate leadership. Indeed, community members and public authorities are both intimately aware of the qualities, connections and resources needed to protect. It was also shown that a range of actors, from older women, elders and chiefs to those they can call upon beyond the community, are involved in governing protection. However, our research suggests that their authority to do so has been eroded by decades of militarisation of South Sudanese society. This has led to an ongoing struggle to reinforce rules of conduct in war, with shifting norms governing the safety of strangers, and including and excluding different groups from protection.

We also found that community members and public authorities engage in self-protection strategies that are not captured by popular frameworks in the existing literature (Baines & Paddon, 2012; Jose & Medie, 2015). At the heart of this is the prevention of disputes escalating into dangerous cycles of violence and hunger. South Sudan's militarised and interdependent inter-communal and national politics have forced public authorities to become acutely aware of the need to avoid violence that can quickly escalate or become subsumed into wider ongoing conflicts. To do so, they use a variety of techniques from separating aggrieved parties and mediating disputes, to drawing on long-held social norms and practices that govern protection and violence. Despite this, our interviewees were clear that many leaders, faced with modern weapons and a decline in the power of deities, are struggling to maintain their authority over unruly youth and increasingly unable to fulfil these roles. This is perhaps why efforts to educate youth and programmes that raise awareness of women's rights were pointed to as important protection strategies by some of those we spoke to.

Rather than a gap between humanitarian and self-protection, many of the strategies South Sudan's public

authorities use to protect communities are akin to those humanitarian organisations traditionally undertake. For example, public authorities' functions as knowledge brokers echo humanitarians' efforts to setup early warning systems; roles as dispute mediators and the guardians of social harmony can be seen as forms of peacekeeping; efforts to redistribute resources and secure safe passages as traditional humanitarian assistance; and contests over norms of conflict and protection have parallels with mandated organisations' attempts to remind belligerents and states of their evolving responsibilities under national and international laws. Where empowered, public authorities engaging in these sorts of activities can offer safety to strangers and carve out broad, inclusive communities. Where they lack legitimacy or their positions are contested, they may choose to limit protection to narrowly defined groups and to deny safety to others. In this sense, public authorities are at the centre of who gets protected when humanitarians are unable or unwilling to play such roles.

Echoing others, our research suggests that common dichotomies in the academic and practitioner protection literature are often non-sensical and unimportant when people are confronted with lethal, direct violence (Fast, 2018). Distinctions between self, community and humanitarian, and militarised and non-militarised protection, for example, mean little for those looking to themselves and their leaders in moments of crisis. For our interviewees, there were much more pertinent questions that would have categorised protection provision in different ways. The public authority of who was providing protection, and their logics of inclusion and exclusion, were key concerns. To stop at examinations of how communities hide, flee or fight back when threatened would be to miss how public authorities shape social norms, use resources and accelerate or decelerate the cycles of violence that are central to protection. We posit, therefore, that protection may be better thought of as a state that can be, and is, achieved by a variety means, each more or less conducive to the prospects for longer term peace.

Research presented in another paper in this special issue shows how humanitarian organisations are already looking for ways to support self-protection strategies in violent protracted conflicts (Kirk et al., 2024). This is often framed as a way to make up for the limitations of outsiders' protection agendas, to proactively work on stopping cycles of violence, and to align protection activities carried out by diverse organisations (Lilly, 2020). The first task, we suggest, is to discern who is providing protection to whom, why and how, and the prospects different understandings and practices hold for wider goals such as human rights, peace or development. Such an undertaking could guide humanitarian organisations towards protection strategies that they can usefully and safely support, and how they may partner

with public authorities with the knowledge and legitimacy to govern them. The alternative is to ignore how self-protection is intimately connected to power and politics, or to miss opportunities to support protection norms and practices that resonate with affected populations in their own vernaculars.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful for the time given, personal experiences shared and the work done by Latjor Dang, who was the Ler-based research assistant on this project. We are also grateful for all the people who participated in this research and shared stories with us about how they have stayed safe and kept their communities protected despite being confronted with armed conflict. We shared our research findings with participants on courses on public authority that we were leading in Juba (South Sudan), the University of Johannesburg (South Africa) and Makerere University (Uganda). Their informal but nuanced and informed feedback was incredibly useful in helping to finalise our understanding and analysis.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no potential conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT


The data on which this paper is based are not available due to the sensitive information it contains.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The research for this paper was approved by the London School of Economics Research Ethics Committee.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Thanks go to Amuor Tabitha Kuol, Latjor Dang and Mary Tai.
- <sup>2</sup> Interview with Community Elder, Bor Town (Bor County), 12 October 2021.
- <sup>3</sup> Interview with local NGO worker, Bor Town (Bor County), 23 October 2021.
- <sup>4</sup> Ethnographic observations, Tochriak (Ler County), March 2022.
- <sup>5</sup> Interview with Community Elder, Rupkong Boma (Ler County), 19 November 2021. Interview with Community Elder, Pariak boma (Bor County), 24 October 2022.
- <sup>6</sup> Ethnographic observations, Tochriak (Ler County), March 2022.
- <sup>7</sup> Interview with Chief, Bor Town (Bor County), 6 October 2021.
- <sup>8</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Bor Town (Bor County), 7 November 2021.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview with local NGO worker, Ler (Ler County), 20 November 2021.
- <sup>10</sup> Interview with Community Elder, Kuoignoi, (Bor County), 6 October 2021.

- <sup>11</sup> Interview with Chief, Bor Town (Bor County), 7 October 2021.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview with Community Elder, Bor Town (Bor County), 13 March 2022.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview with Community Elder, Anydi (Bor County), 25 October 2021. Interview with Community Elder, Kuoignoi boma (Bor County), 6 October 2021.
- <sup>14</sup> Interview with Chief, Pariak boma (Bor County), 13 March 2022.
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Community Elder, Anydi (Bor County), 25 October 2021. Interview with Chief, Pariak boma (Bor County), 13 March 2022. Interview with Youth Leader, Pariak boma (Bor County), 24 October 2021.
- <sup>16</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Bor Town (Bor County), 6 November 2021.
- <sup>17</sup> Interview with Community Elder, Kuoignoi boma (Bor County), 6 October 2021.
- <sup>18</sup> Interview with NGO worker, Bor Town (Bor County) 23 October 2021.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview with female Community Leader, Pariak boma (Bor County), 24 October 2021.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Chief, Tibek (Bor County), 2 October 2021. Interview with Community Elder, Bor Town (Bor County), 27 October 2021. Interview with Chief, Bor Town (Bor County), 9 October 2021.
- <sup>21</sup> Interview with Chief, Bor Town (Bor County), 10 September 2021.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview with Chief, Pariak boma (Bor County), 13 March 2022.
- <sup>24</sup> Interview with Community Elder, Anyidi boma (Bor County), 26 October 2021.
- <sup>25</sup> Interview with Community Elder, Bor Town (Bor County), 6 October 2021. Interview with Community Elder, Pariak, (Bor County), 24 October 2021.
- <sup>26</sup> Interview with Chief, Bor Town (Bor County), 10 September 2021.
- <sup>27</sup> Interview with Chief, Bor Town (Bor County), 9 September 2021.
- <sup>28</sup> Interview with Community Elder, Bor Town (Bor County), 27 October 2021.
- <sup>29</sup> Interview with Community Elder, Pariak boma (Bor County), 24 October 2021.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with Chief, Pabial (Bor County), 20 October 2021.
- <sup>31</sup> Interview with South Sudanese NGO worker, Ler (Ler County), 20 November 2021.
- <sup>32</sup> Interview with Chief, Bor Town (Bor County), 20 October 2021.
- <sup>33</sup> Interview with Chief, Bor Town (Bor County), 26 October 2021.
- <sup>34</sup> Interview with female Community Leader, Pariak boma (Bor County), 24 October 2021.
- <sup>35</sup> Interview with Community Elder, Kuoignoi boma (Bor County), 6 October 2021.
- <sup>36</sup> Interview with female Community Leader, Pariak boma (Bor County), 24 October 2021.
- <sup>37</sup> Interview with Chief, Marol, Bor Town (Bor County), 16 March 2022. Interview with Chief Leader, Pariak boma (Bor County), 13 March 2022.
- <sup>38</sup> Interview with Chief, Twic East (Bor County), 13 March 2022.
- <sup>39</sup> Interview with NGO Worker, Marol, Bor Town (Bor County), 6 November 2021.

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**How to cite this article:** Kirk, T., Pendle, N. & Akoi, A.D. (2024) Community self-protection, public authority and the safety of strangers in Bor and Ler, South Sudan. *Global Policy*, 00, 1–12. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13364>