

A photograph of two women standing outdoors under a large tree. Both women are carrying large yellow plastic water jugs balanced on their heads. The woman on the left is wearing a pink patterned dress and has a joyful expression. The woman on the right is wearing a grey dress with a colorful floral pattern and is also smiling. The background shows green foliage and a clear blue sky.

IMPACT ON PARTICIPANTS, THEIR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Community Based Sociotherapy in South Sudan



AWACE



Dorcas

South Sudan

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This publication is based on qualitative research conducted in March 2025 on the effects of Community Based Sociotherapy. The research involved interviews and group discussions with CBS participants, facilitators, relatives/neighbours of CBS participants, and local leaders. Full report available on request.



Background

Bor South County in Jonglei State, South Sudan, is characterised by a history of violent conflicts and displacement due to violence and floodings. Since the start of the civil war in 2013 many people have left their villages and have found refuge near Bor town, where security has been more stable. Women, men and children have experienced traumatic events which impacts their mental well-being and family relations. They are trying to find new economic activities as the ongoing insecurity in the rural areas makes it difficult to farm or keep cattle. But building up a new life is not easy in the challenging context of Bor.

ZOA Dorcas is an international humanitarian organisation working in Bor South County since 2012. ZOA Dorcas has been implementing a 5-year project in Bor South County funded by the Pharos foundation. This project aims to contribute to peace and stability through food security & livelihoods, wash and peacebuilding. One of the approaches is Community Based Sociotherapy (CBS). ZOA Dorcas partners with AWACE, a local NGO with a strong expertise in CBS.

Community Based Sociotherapy

The Community Based Sociotherapy (CBS) approach is community led and driven. For a period of 15 weeks, participants form small groups that consist of 15 men and women. In these groups they discuss topics that are of daily concern, guided by two well-trained facilitators from the community. They follow the six-phase model and the seven principles (see figure below) to structure the conversations. The aim of this approach is to enable participants to learn and experience new constructive behaviour. This learning process will ultimately have a positive influence on their personal life as well as on their environment personal life as well as on their environment.

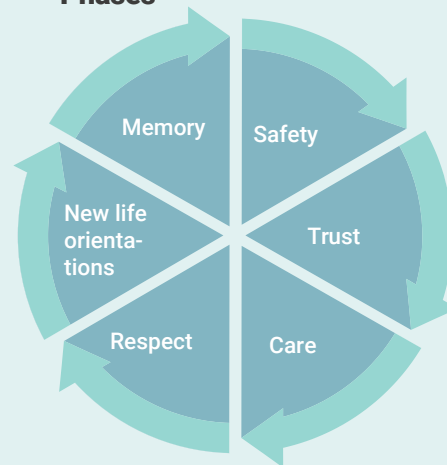
CBS, which is a new methodology in South Sudan, has been implemented since 2021 in two payams, Anyidi and Kolnyang, in Bor South County. In total 48 CBS facilitators have been trained who have facilitated 123 CBS groups (in 7 cycles of 15 weeks each) with 1790 participants (77% women). IICBS, the International Institute for Community Based Sociotherapy, has provided the first training sessions and online coaching.

Community Based Sociotherapy methodology

Principles

- Inter-est
- Equality
- Democracy
- Here and Now
- Responsibility
- Participation
- Learning by Doing

Phases



CBS Facilitators and Trainers

The CBS facilitators, 48 women and men, were selected from the communities and were trained extensively in the CBS methodology by certified CBS experts. 8 facilitators have been graduated to CBS trainers and they have trained new CBS facilitators.

"I was a teacher before, but as a facilitator you are not teaching, you show the way. Participation and

equality are important. This was not easy for me in the beginning." CBS facilitator

"CBS has changed me. I now want to help change others. To restore hope after all the crises and trauma, and to leave the past

behind." CBS facilitator and trainer



CBS OUTCOME

Mental well being

CBS had a positive impact on mental well-being. CBS participants experienced stress relief, emotional healing and empowerment and mental growth.

Stress relief: Many participants found relief from stress related to family conflicts and poverty. Sharing their experiences in the group and hearing the stories of other group members has been very beneficial.

Emotional healing: The group was a safe space to open up and share about the past, receive support and learn a new focus on the future. Women with suicidal thoughts regained new hope and new ways to manage emotions.

"I was wounded inside, and thought that I could not live anymore, but I regained life and feel free. I was aggressive,



but now I have peace in my heart and body." Male CBS participant

Empowerment and mental growth:

Participants changed from hopelessness and isolation to agency and hope.

"I'm a widow and before I was just living and waiting till our death. I thought life was short. I wanted to abandon the children. But now I learned that I had to do something myself. I started a business with the VSLA and feel less stressed. My children have now a normal life like others."

Female CBS participant



CBS OUTCOME

Gender equality

The CBS methodology has contributed to more equal gender relations according to the CBS participants.

Equal participation in family and community:

CBS promotes the principle of equality, where men and women sit together in circles, and everyone has an equal opportunity to speak. This challenges traditional gender roles where men dominated decision-making, allowing women to share their experiences and contribute equally to discussions, both in CBS groups and within their communities.

"Before women could not sit with men, but they do so in the CBS group which is mixed.

Facilitators are both male and female. They all talk. Now ladies in the community can talk." Male CBS participant



Women gained confidence through practicing in CBS group:

The mixed CBS groups provided a safe space for women to speak openly with men and to give advice to them. This experience has helped women gain confidence, enabling them to speak in public and engage in discussions that were traditionally dominated by men.

CBS OUTCOME

New economic activities

Many CBS participants had lost their traditional livelihood activities because of the displacement from the villages to town. Having to find alternative income generating activities is not easy.

Entrepreneurial mindset and starting economic activities:

CBS groups provided members with advice on starting and engaging in economic activities, such as farming, trading, and small businesses. For example, some participants started farming or selling goods, and others began activities like collecting firewood or selling logs, all encouraged by the CBS group discussions on care and new life orientation.

"I was just sitting under the tree and playing cards, I was lazy. During new life orientation I learned that you can change:

let's do something. I bought salt and started making salted fish. I sold them and contributed to my family." Male CBS participant

Empowerment through economic independence:

Many CBS participants feel empowered by their ability to contribute financially to their families.

"A widow in the CBS group was stressed as her house was destroyed by flooding and she did not have capacity to rebuild the house. She was living with relatives, but this was very stressful. The CBS group members counselled her to start an economic activity (vegetable garden) to earn money and to build a small house. She did so and now she lives on her own and free from conflicts." Male CBS participant



CBS OUTCOME

Stronger families

Family life in Bor is challenging due to displacement, domestic violence and family conflicts. CBS has improved family relations.

Less conflicts and domestic violence in the family:

CBS groups played a significant role in resolving family conflicts, such as those between co-wives, and between husbands and wives. Through the group's discussions about care, respect and trust participants learned how to reconcile differences and build better relationships.

"I did not know that peace starts at home. I thought peace was at government level. But now I can mediate conflicts which I could not before. I was often fighting with my wife and caning the children. But now there is no more fighting." Male CBS participant

Shared commitment to take care of the family needs:

Husbands, wives and children started to develop economic activities to contribute to the family expenses. This brought more money to the family, and a joint commitment to care for the family.

"I used to isolate myself from my wife and children because of poverty. During the phase of new life orientation, I decided to collect wood and sell logs in town. The money I used to buy food and pay school fees. Now I'm feeling free. During new life orientation I learned that I could change my life, I should not wait for others to change me." Male CBS participant



CBS OUTCOME

Living peacefully

One of the most frequently mentioned changes after participating in a CBS group is social cohesion and peace. In this volatile context this is a very relevant outcome area.

Reduction in conflicts: CBS has played a significant role in reducing conflicts within communities, including at common points like the borehole, between families, and among clans. CBS participants intervene to mediate and de-escalate tensions, helping prevent conflicts from escalating into violence.

Promoting social cohesion: CBS groups bring together individuals from different gender, age groups and clans. This fostered a sense of unity and cooperation.

"We have Dinka from Anyidi and from Twic East in our CBS group. The discussions about care and respect helped me to live in Bor

with other people who are not from Anyidi. We are all neighbours, and we all have experienced displacement." Female CBS participant



Changing social norms on violence and revenge: CBS has contributed to a shift in social morals, where violence is no longer seen as the solution to problems. The emphasis on safety and care in CBS meetings has led individuals to value peace and reconciliation over revenge and hostility, even in the aftermath of violent events like killings.

"I used to be rude and not forgiving. In 2013 Nuer killed my relatives and I wanted to have revenge. In 2024 I went to Juba and I told the Nuer that I will forgive them. This is thanks to CBS and our discussions about safety and care." Male CBS participant

CBS OUTCOME

Community participation

CBS helped women and men to become more active in the community.

Leadership and community engagement:

CBS participants, women and men, have taken on leadership roles within their communities, particularly in managing communal resources like boreholes. They mediate conflicts and ensure equitable access to water, which has improved the functioning of the waterpoint. This shows an increase in active leadership and responsibility among CBS participants.

"Women leaders are now working together with men. Before we did not do this, we were afraid of what people would say if women were seen in public." Female leader



Increased confidence and leadership skills :

CBS has helped individuals overcome personal fears and isolation. People who were once afraid to speak in public or participate in group discussions have gained confidence through CBS. Local leaders who participated in CBS groups testified that CBS helped them to improve their leadership skills. These leaders, once primarily focused on protecting their own people, now seek truth and fairness in resolving conflicts, ensuring that all parties are heard and treated equitably.

"CBS helped me to conduct community meetings in a better way, not replying to bad words in the meeting, and tell the truth." Male CBS participant



AWACE

Awake for Women and Children's Empowerment (AWACE) is the local CBS organisation, based in Bor. The AWACE staff has been trained by the International Institute for Community Based Sociotherapy (IICBS) and are now expert CBS trainers. They are passionate about CBS and have played a key role in the monitoring and supervision of the CBS facilitators. The CBS expertise is therefore strongly embedded in Bor South County.



What makes CBS successful?

Sharing with each other

CBS is often translated into the Dinka language as Akut de room de wel ("sharing with each other"). Participants value strongly the practice of sharing experiences and struggles with each other. They feel that they are not alone in their struggles and the shared stories help them to reflect on their own feelings and behaviour.

Having a mixed and safe group for 15 weeks

The CBS group includes women and men, young and old, and people from different clans. The principle of equality of all participants is practiced for example through the sitting arrangement in a circle and the opportunity for all to talk. The group meets for 15 weeks, 1 session per week, so it is not a one-off activity.

"The church is preaching about peace, but we can only listen."

In CBS we can talk and share our experiences so that you don't forget. CBS is preaching and practising." Female CBS participant



The structured application of the different phases

Each CBS group talks about safety, trust, care, respect, new life orientation and memories. New life orientation was the topic that was seen as the most powerful topic. It helped participants to reflect on how to leave the past behind and to take initiatives for improving the current situation.

"We discussed new life orientation: I thought that life could not change but you can change also when your life started bad. You can change your life yourself, stopping conflicts will improve your life." Male CBS participant

Key take aways

The CBS methodology has proven to be effective and relevant in the South Sudanese context of violent conflicts and displacement. This qualitative research illustrates its impact on participants, their families and communities in Bor South County.

>> CBS has a strong positive effect on individual well-being, family life and the neighbourhood as also confirmed by relatives and neighbours of CBS participants. Changes around economic activities strongly contributed to improved mental well-being and family life. A strong gender effect was also observed and CBS members addressed conflicts at the family and neighbourhood level, but less at a higher level (boma/payam level).

>> The CBS approach was adapted to and accepted in the context. The facilitators came from the communities and did not use complicated textbooks. They followed the CBS methodology which was contextualised during their training to make it relevant for the Bor context.

>> It is recommended to involve more (male) youth, and people in leadership in CBS groups to have more impact on conflict reduction and peace at boma and payam level. A pool of CBS trainers is available in Bor which can be reached through AWACE and ZOA Dorcas. There is potential to adapt this model in other parts of South Sudan. ZOA Dorcas is considering expanding CBS implementation to other locations.



ZOA Dorcas South Sudan

Phone: +211 926499991
I: www.zoa-international.com
E: info@zoadorcas.ngo

Text

Corita Corbijn (ZOA international)

Photography

Corita Corbijn
Yolanda van den Broek
Peter Caton

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