Cultivating peaceful relations in Gambella, Ethiopia

BEST PRACTICE PAPER

"Previously, when a conflict arose, people immediately acted emotionally. Revenge was what they were thinking about. Today, instead of fighting, we sit down together and talk."

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TOGETHER FOR THE BETTER FUTURE (OSSHD)

ZOA
from relief to recovery

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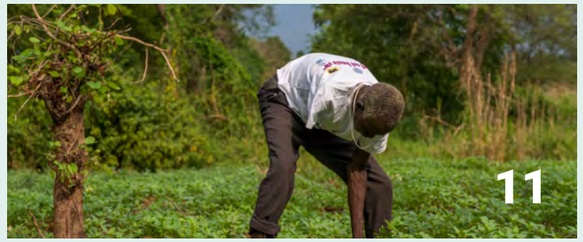
A consortium consisting of ZOA, the International Rescue Committee (IRC, lead) and the Organisation for Social Service Health and Development (OSSHD) has implemented the EUTF funded project from January 2021 until May 2025: “Promoting Stability and Strengthening Basic Service Delivery for Host Communities, Refugees, and Other Displaced Populations in Gambella Regional State (GRS) of Ethiopia”. The project aimed to improve access and quality of health services (responsibility of IRC and OSSHD) and peaceful relations between all groups (responsibility of ZOA).

This best practice paper is based on the Outcome Harvesting excercise conducted in October 2024, and presents the outcomes of ZOA’s activities within this consortium.



1. Introduction

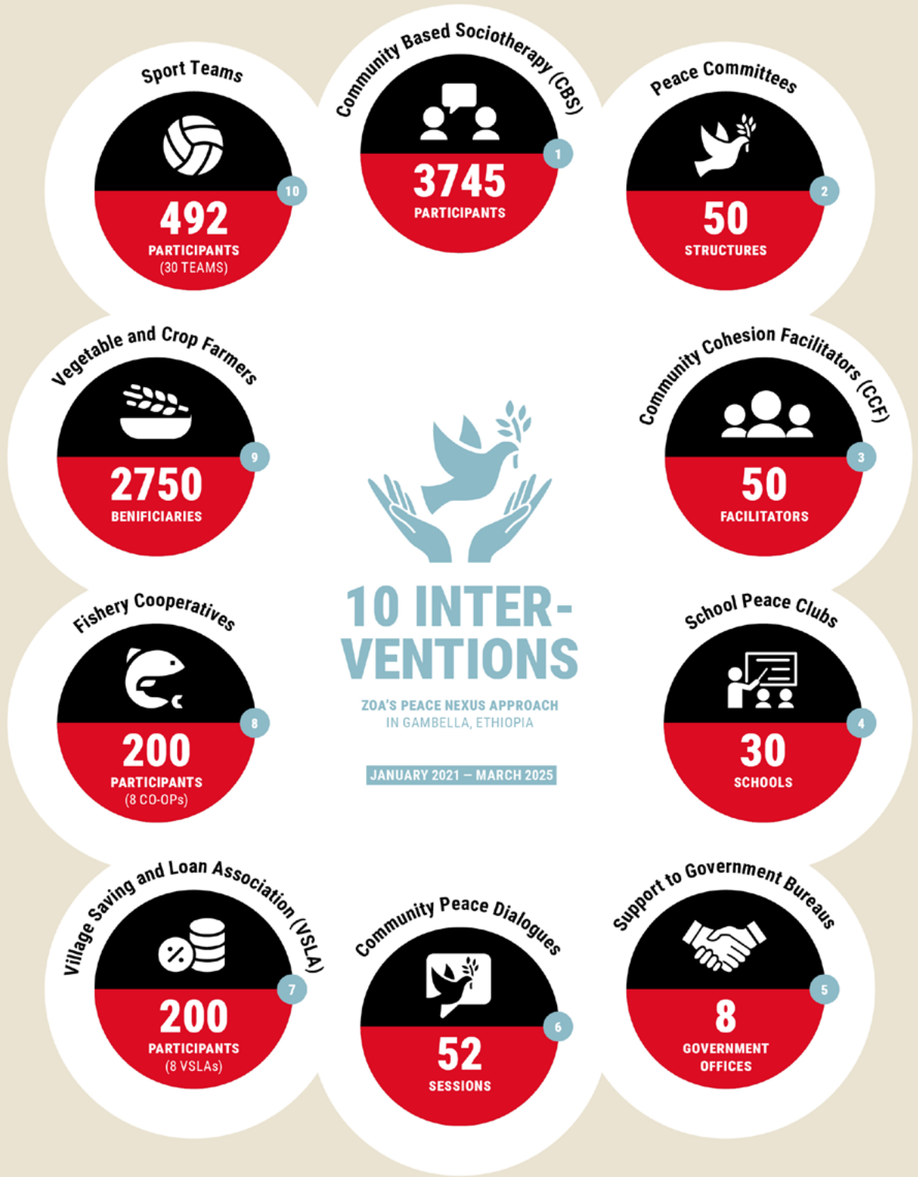
Gambella, a region in the Western part of Ethiopia, currently hosts around 400,000 South Sudanese refugees who have fled the protracted civil conflict in their home country[1]. This influx of refugees creates a complex dynamic with both positive and negative impacts on the host communities. On the positive side, the presence of refugees can foster cultural exchange and economic diversification. However, challenges such as competition for limited resources (land, water, employment) can lead to tensions between the refugee and host populations. These tensions necessitate careful management and collaborative approaches to ensure peaceful coexistence. Additionally, existing tensions between the Nuer and Anyuak communities in Ethiopia have led to violent incidents in recent years. The large-scale arrival of Nuer refugees has intensified competition over scarce land resources in Gambella, exacerbating these intergroup grievances.

To address and mitigate potential conflicts among refugees and host communities, the project “Promoting Stability and Strengthening Basic Service Delivery for Host Communities, Refugees, and Other Displaced Populations in Gambella Regional State (GRS) of Ethiopia” has been implemented. Running from January 2021 to May 2025, this initiative covers four woredas (districts) and six refugee camps.

In this project, ZOA has employed a **Peace Nexus** approach, which integrates both Peacebuilding interventions and Food Security and Livelihoods to contribute to peace and social cohesion. ZOA organised Community-Based Sociotherapy (CBS) groups, and supported the establishment and training of Peace Committees (PCs) and Community Cohesion Facilitators (CCF). ZOA engaged youth in Sport teams and School Peace Clubs aiming to foster positive interactions between different groups. ZOA also supported local government authorities and peacebuilding dialogues that were organized by the local authorities together with community leaders. Several Food Security and Livelihood interventions such as Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA), fishery cooperatives, crop and vegetable production, were implemented with the overarching aim to contribute to more market interaction between the diverse groups and in turn, building stronger positive relations. This project serves as a prime example of the Peace Nexus approach in action.

In October 2024, ZOA conducted an Outcome Harvesting exercise to document the results of the project intervention and assess the extent of its impact. This method focuses on identifying tangible behavioral changes among project participants, other stakeholders, and the broader community. Participants identify substantial changes and describe how the project and other external factors contributed to these changes. The approach allows ZOA to go beyond predetermined outcome and output indicators, emphasizing the perspectives of the participants. In total, 45 interviews and 10 Focus Group Discussions were conducted in all project areas. To validate these findings, external stakeholders confirmed the harvested outcome statements. This paper summarizes the main findings, organized by the different domains of change mentioned by the participants, and concludes with lessons learned for future Peace Nexus programming.

[1] UNHCR 2024



2. Improved relations between South Sudanese and Ethiopian host communities

The Outcome Harvesting exercise generated many outcome statements that indicate an improved relation between South Sudanese refugees and Ethiopian host communities in the project intervention area. These outcome statements can be clustered into three main changes.

Improved individual contacts

In Gambella region, refugees and host community members reside in separate locations characterized by infrequent interactions. This has led to the development of negative stereotypes and resentment between the two groups. Various project activities, such as training sessions for Peace Committees, CBS facilitators and sports teams, served as a platform for individuals from both groups to meet and get to know each other. This fostered mutual appreciation and support and helped refugees safely access markets in Ethiopian villages.

"Refugees had stolen 300 goats from the host community's villages. When we found the goats, we informed the Peace Committee in the woreda, and the goats were returned. In June 2024, two refugees were killed by a man from the host community. We told our community not to take revenge but to hand over the case to the local authorities." - Mr. Thurbil Babur Kuok, Secretary of the Peace Committee Jewi refugee camp -

Peaceful conflict resolution

Inter-group conflicts between refugees and host communities frequently escalated into widespread violence. These conflicts arose due to many reasons, often competition for resources. Project participants reported that conflicts are now being resolved peacefully or referred to local district (*woreda*) level government security offices and camp authorities, reducing the inclination for revenge or escalation. This is the result of the work of Peace Committees and Community Cohesion Facilitators (CCFs) in both refugee camps and host communities. By jointly attending ZOA's training sessions, a safe space has been created for learning non-violent conflict resolution and building relationships between refugee and host community Peace Committees and CCFs. This has enabled a quick outreach to each other and government bodies during conflicts. Regular Peace Committee meetings to discuss conflict issues and good contacts with the relevant authorities also helped to address the conflicts effectively.

Increased market interaction

The influx of refugees in Gambella has strained natural resources and fuelled grievances of host community members who feel refugees receive more support from NGO's. ZOA supported livelihood interventions that brought refugees and host communities together, such as fishery cooperatives, Village Saving and Loan Associations (VSLAs), crop and vegetable production, and the construction of shops. Refugees buying vegetables and fish from host community members reduced conflicts as both groups recognized the mutual benefits of their commercial interactions and traded their differences for cooperation.

"In our fishery cooperative restaurant, refugees can enjoy eating fresh fish and other Ethiopians come as well. This creates trust between us and the refugees."
- member of fishery cooperative in Gog woreda -

3. Improved relations among South Sudanese refugees

The refugees living in the six camps in Gambella are predominantly Nuer, with a small number of Anyuak in one of the camps, Pugnido 1. The Nuer refugees come from various regions in South Sudan and belong to different clans and sub-clans. Some have arrived recently, while others have been in the camps for over a decade. Life in the camps is challenging, with limited livelihood opportunities and interrupted food distributions in recent years. Concerns about family back home and past traumatic events also impact their daily lives. Good relations among the refugees are not guaranteed, as tensions and conflicts frequently arise over scarce resources and between different (sub) clans.

Peaceful dispute resolution and reduced conflict among refugees

Within the refugee camps, Peace Committee members and Community Cohesion Facilitators (CCFs) have successfully prevented and addressed many conflicts among refugees, including disputes at water points, schools, and food distribution sites. Community members who participated in Community-Based Sociotherapy (CBS) sessions have become more proactive in mediating disputes within their families and neighbourhoods. These sessions have helped them develop personal conflict resolution skills and the confidence to assist others. This shift not only demonstrates a change in individual behaviour but also highlights the growing importance of collective responsibility and mutual support within the community.

"The peace committee is present throughout our camp, raising knowledge about peace, particularly in troubled locations such as the water point. They have also participated by resolving communal conflicts and misunderstandings within and between families. This change is significant for the community. I heard from zone leaders that people are pleased with the change since their concerns will be solved in the community." - Mr. Gatluak Reath, RCC (Refugee Central Committee) Chairperson Pinyudo 1 camp -

More social cohesion and unity among refugees

CBS groups, sport teams and school peace clubs have brought together refugees from diverse backgrounds. Participants have shared numerous examples of how these interactions helped them overcome negative feelings and develop solidarity.

"In the refugee camp I used to fight with Nuer people from other clans. After engaging in CBS, I went to this group to apologise. Since then we are living in peace" - Young man in Kule refugee camp -

Improved access to justice services

Access to Ethiopian formal justice providers is challenging for South Sudanese refugees, as they must travel to Gambella town for this. In cooperation with UNHCR, this project has supported mobile courts that travel to the refugee camps, allowing more refugees to have their cases resolved according to Ethiopian law. In total 1033 refugees accessed the mobile court with 337 cases (330 civil and 7 criminal cases) managed. This improved and timely access to justice has prevented conflicts from escalating into violence. For example, a conflict over a fatherhood claim between different men was quickly resolved by the court's decision to conduct a DNA test.

4. Improved relations between Ethiopians from Anyuak and Nuer backgrounds

Relations between the Ethiopian Anyuak and Nuer communities in Gambella have been tense in recent years, leading to movement restrictions and violent incidents. Although the project has not addressed the socio-political root causes of these conflicts, the Outcome Harvesting exercise has indicated positive bottom-up changes among individuals and communities from both backgrounds.

Economic collaboration

Selected Nuer and Anyuak community members have established business collaborations, such as Anyuak fishery cooperatives providing fish to Nuer retailers. This has strengthened economic cohesion between the two ethnic groups in the host community and contributed to increased peaceful interactions. Additionally, they now buy goods from each other and meet peacefully in their everyday lives. As a result of the established cooperatives, Anyuak and Nuer community members are jointly engaging in businesses and generate income to improve their livelihoods and those of their families.

"The different fishery cooperatives consists of people from both Anyuak and Nuer communities, including women and youth. The diversity in the cooperatives in Itang is a lesson for others how to share resources and work together peacefully."
- Mr. Kek Gatkout, Itang Special Woreda technical officer -

The peacebuilding training manual for Peace Committees and CCFs in Gambella, available in English, Nuer, and Anyuak languages, equips participants with the skills to prevent and resolve local conflicts. The curriculum consists of five modules dedicated to strengthening Peace Committee capacities and thirteen modules addressing specific conflicts related to cattle raiding, grazing land disputes, presence of small arms.[2]

Positive interactions

The project fostered increased inter-ethnic cooperation between Anyuak and Nuer community members, now actively safeguarding one another. Demonstrating this commitment, individuals at risk of being attacked have been safely escorted home by members of the other group. Joint Anyuak-Nuer sporting competitions, guided by trained coaches, have further solidified these bonds, with friendships forming between players from different ethnic backgrounds, building trust and understanding

"A drunk Nuer men had wandered into our village. Children were alerting the village that the Nuer had come to attack us. But I went to talk to the man and brought him back to his village. My people told me that I had done a good job, otherwise the man would have been killed. I got the courage from the peacebuilding training I had received from ZOA."
- Mrs. Ajulu Ochan, Anyuak CCF in Gambella town -

Peaceful conflict resolution

Peace Committees (PCs) and Community Cohesion Facilitators (CCFs) have become powerful agents of change, effectively resolving numerous conflicts between the Anyuak and Nuer. People are now consistently turning to them for dispute resolution. When necessary, CCFs and PCs refer cases to the formal justice systems in their locality. For example, an Anyuak Peace Committee returned cattle stolen by a group from Anyuak kebele (village) to the Nuer kebele in Itang special woreda.

This positive development demonstrates the effectiveness of these community-led dispute resolution initiatives. They have fostered trust between the Anyuak and Nuer and improved community confidence to travel and interact across different areas. ZOA's strong collaboration with government police and justice bodies has strengthened the government's relationship with the PCs and CCFs to ensure effective communication and cooperation.

"If our kebele's Peace Committee observes something unusual, such as theft, in the surrounding area, they will share it with the neighbouring kebele's (Nuer Area) Peace Committee and act together. Additionally, in case of disputes between the Nuer and Anyuak kebeles, the Peace Committee in nearby kebeles solve the problem through discussion" - Mr. Koang Kun Gar, head of peace and security department Gambella town kebele 02 -

[2] The peacebuilding training manual is available upon request through ZOA Ethiopia

5. Engagement of local (government) leaders in peace and conflict resolution

Both community-based and government stakeholders play crucial roles in peace and conflict resolution. The project has therefore intentionally collaborated with Peace Committees (PCs) and Community Cohesion Facilitators (CCFs) in Gambella, as well as various government stakeholders, including the Peace & Security offices at the regional and woreda levels, the police, and the Supreme Court. Communities and government officials have observed positive changes in their engagement and collaboration, leading to more effective conflict de-escalation and resolution.

Faster and more adequate conflict resolution by the Peace and Security bureau

ZOA has provided training on conflict sensitivity, relevant laws and proclamations, and peacebuilding to the Peace & Security bureau staff, who also received material support (desktops, printers and motorbikes). Together with the Peace & Security bureau and the Peace Committees, ZOA developed a context-specific peacebuilding training manual in local languages. This manual is now used by ZOA staff and the Peace & Security bureau to train Peace Committees and other local peace actors. The Peace & Security staff recognize that they are now more active and effective in conflict resolution, thanks to adequate technical tools and means of transport.

Improved service provision of the Regional Supreme Court in the camps

The Regional Supreme Court, through its mobile court, has delivered swift and quality justice services in the refugee camps. ZOA, in cooperation with UNHCR, supported the mobile court financially and with training. This is affirmed by the Refugee Central Committee (RCC) in Tierkidi refugee camp:

"ZOA supported judges from the regional supreme court to come to Tierkidi refugee camp. Before the establishment of the mobile court service, a traditional court and justice system was used in the camp. This kind of service had limitations in addressing some cases in line with the Ethiopian law. The service provided by the regional supreme court helped to handle cases as per the law of the land."

Improved collaboration between Peace Committees, local government, and camp authorities

Joint training sessions for government actors, CCFs, Peace Committees, local leaders, and camp authorities have brought these stakeholders together, fostering a better understanding of their distinct roles in conflict resolution and improved capacity to fulfil their roles as duty bearers. This has resulted in more effective collaboration. The Peace Committees (PCs) are now referring conflicts to law enforcement actors, while the authorities appreciate and solicit the interventions of the Peace Committees and CCF for conflict prevention and mediation. Additionally, CCFs and PCs participate in community Peace Dialogues organised by the government and UNHCR in collaboration with ZOA.

"The community peace dialogues are highly effective because they are held at community level and people solve their issues using their own conflict resolution mechanisms. They refer to us if needed. It is not a top-down activity, where often the message gets lost on the way down from regional to woreda to kebele, but the community peace dialogues are bottom-up." - Mr. Ojulu Biru Abdella, Peacebuilding Director Regional Peace & Security Bureau in Gambella -

6. Improved food production, income and positive interactions

Food Security and Livelihoods (FSL) interventions are a crucial part of the project, creating market opportunities for positive encounters between people from previously antagonistic backgrounds. These interventions, which support 8 fishery cooperatives, 8 Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs), and over 2700 crop and vegetable farmers, have had considerable positive economic effects on the participants while also serving as connectors between groups.

Increased productivity, improved food security and income

By accessing improved seeds and receiving fish production materials, participants have gained essential knowledge, practical skills, and required materials in farming and fishery. This has led to increased surplus production of crops, vegetables, and fishery products. For example, in Gog woreda, Okedi kebele, vegetable farmers expanded their farms from 0.5 hectares to 2 hectares per person, boosting both production and income.

These achievements have enabled families to produce enough food for their own consumption and sell surplus vegetables to cover basic expenses. In Itang Special Woreda, fishery cooperatives have acquired advanced fishing skills, developed business plans, and received essential materials to launch their businesses. This support has allowed them to sell products, such as milk and food, to different community groups, while creating assets, generating income, reducing unemployment and creating market interaction.

Improved saving culture and access to loans

VSLA members can now generate income through access to loans from their association. This financial support has empowered them to invest in their agricultural activities and expand their fish production, leading to enhanced economic stability and improved livelihoods. The 200 VSLA members have collectively saved 15,232 Euro, and 10,324 Euro has been provided as loans to members. The VSLAs have motivated their members to save, start or expand their businesses, and open bank accounts for their savings. Business skills training and experience sharing among VSLA members have allowed them to gain new insights and support each other. These economic activities have helped members become less dependent on food distributions (in the refugee camps) or other external support. They have led to increased mutual trust and more collaboration between the members.

"I bought clothes and a school bag for my son. I was able to do that with the money I got from the sugar and coffee business which was established after the loan from the VSLA. Because of the VSLA participation I have been able to make additional friends. We still visit each other's houses to discuss our living conditions and problems, and search for solutions. My knowledge and skills regarding business management, saving, and profit-making were developed, and I can profit from my small business and support my family." - Mrs Achara Wello, VSLA member in Abol woreda -

7. Improved mental well-being and gender relations

The project aimed to improve relations between diverse groups through peacebuilding and economic interventions. However, these actions have also brought about positive changes in mental well-being and gender dynamics, as observed by the project participants.

Improved mental well-being and abandonment of harmful practices

Participants in CBS groups frequently shared how the sessions helped them feel better emotionally. Members with depression and suicidal thoughts found relief in the CBS groups, where they could share their feelings and experiences in a safe environment within a trusted social network. Overall, 94 per cent of CBS members reported having someone to talk to about troubling memories (compared to 64 per cent before joining the group). Similarly, 61 per cent of CBS participants said they had someone to comfort them when feeling distressed or lonely (compared to 7 per cent at the start of the sessions)[3].

The CBS methodology helps members to reflect on their behaviour and how others perceive them. Moreover participation in sport teams has led to positive behavioural changes. Sport team members testified to giving up negative behaviours like excessive alcohol consumption, aggression, and gambling.

"Before joining the basketball team, I did not take care of myself. I was always drinking alcohol and quarrelling with other people. But now I became a disciplined man and a smart model for others. My coach gave me advice and the sport rules and the behaviour of my friends in the team helped me to change." - Mr. Jikagne Peter, member of basketball team in Gambella -

Community Based Sociotherapy (CBS) is implemented in small groups of 12 – 15 women and men from different age groups, guided by two well-trained facilitators from the community. The groups meet during a period of 15 weeks on a weekly basis. The aim of the approach is that the participants learn and experience constructive behaviour and new ways of dealing with past negative experiences. The approach uses a six-phase model to guide the conversation in the small groups, going from safety to trust, care, respect, new life orientations and memory.

Increased confidence in social interactions

The CBS sessions have helped both men and women grow in confidence and communication skills. This is especially noteworthy for women in the communities, who traditionally do not speak out in public or participate in conflict resolution. Now, they feel comfortable participating actively in community meetings and play key roles in CBS sessions as both facilitators and participants. Moreover, women have taken up leadership roles in the Peace Committees and as CCFs, effectively resolving disputes within families and communities. Women's involvement in volleyball teams has also promoted inclusion and challenged cultural barriers that hinder women to participate in public engagements.

Reduction of gender-based violence

Since the establishment of the Peace Committees and collaboration with zonal leaders in Nyuyniel Refugee Camp in 2022, incidents of gender-based violence (GBV), such as rape and domestic abuse, have decreased. Fewer cases are brought to the Refugee Central Committee (RCC). Women now feel safer collecting firewood in the forests, and community awareness of GBV has increased, fostering trust among women in their environment.

"We worked jointly with the zonal leaders and the elders in the camp, engaging in peace dialogues and discussions on the challenges women face and how to overcome them. The zonal leaders spread the messages to their respective communities. Currently, we have not received any reports on rape cases."
- Peace Committee member from Nyuyniel Refugee Camp -

[3] CBS evaluation report, 2024

8. Improved relations in the school

Schools provide a space where students from diverse backgrounds, including Nuer, Anyuak, and other ethnicities, can freely meet and interact. However, ethnic conflicts in the community often spill over into the school environment. This leads to frequent conflicts among students and between students and teachers, which deteriorates the learning atmosphere. ZOA has supported School Peace Clubs comprised of students trained in conflict mediation and equipped with materials like speakers, microphones, and visibility jackets. These students step forward when they hear about conflicts and organize events in and outside the school to promote studying and living in peace.

Fewer conflict incidents inside the school compound and in the community

"Since the start of the Peace Club in Gambella secondary school in 2022, students are less involved in fighting due to peer mediation and other school peace activities," observed Mr. Belay Seyoum the school director. Over the past years, violent clashes at the secondary school in Gambella have been eliminated, despite ongoing conflicts in the town. Other schools report similar positive developments. Additionally, the School Peace Clubs conduct school cleaning campaigns, games, and Q&A competition sessions to promote unity and cohesion. The peaceful coexistence among students has not only enhanced the school environment, but also helped reduce violent conflicts in the broader community. Tensions addressed in the school do not escalate outside its premises, and School Peace Club members have become active peace ambassadors in their communities.

More collaboration between Nuer and Anyuak students in the school

The secondary school in refugee camp Pugnido 1 has both Anyuak and Nuer refugee students. Even amid high ethnic conflict in 2023, the School Peace Club organized discussions that successfully fostered trust and unity among the students. They studied together, used the same library, and spent their break time together. The school achieved remarkable success in maintaining a peaceful teaching and learning process during that difficult year, promoting 75 per cent of its grade 12 students to university—the highest in the woreda.

" I have changed since joining the School Peace Club. I'm no longer responding when people want to quarrel with me. I have become a role model". - student in Gambella secondary school -

Better learning environment in the school

Secondary schools in Gambella have witnessed remarkable improvements in student behaviour and inter-group relations. Members of the School Peace Clubs identify and report misbehaving students. They work with school authorities to control the gates and fences, preventing unauthorized persons, including armed students, from entering. Students have demonstrated greater respect for school rules, and student-teacher relations have become more respectful, reducing conflicts with the school administration. Students are actively engaged in collaborative learning across ethnic lines, creating a positive teaching and learning environment.

9. Best Practices in peacebuilding

1 Peace Committees and Community Cohesion Facilitators (CCF) have been effective in conflict mediation and de-escalation

Peace Committees and CCFs have proven particularly impactful in conflict resolution. This was illustrated by the over 600 conflicts they solved. They played a crucial role in de-escalating various conflicts, referring cases to authorities, and maintaining social cohesion within both refugee and host communities. The joint peacebuilding training, which brought together Peace Committee members and CCFs from diverse backgrounds, provided valuable opportunities for networking across conflict lines. These successes highlight the importance of community-based approaches in conflict resolution and the need for continued support for such initiatives.

2 Community Based Sociotherapy (CBS) improves mental wellbeing and social interaction skills for men and women

CBS has significantly improved mental well-being in the project locations, especially for women. Among refugees from various locations and (sub)clans, CBS helped create more solidarity and social cohesion. Women have gained confidence to speak out in public meetings, express their needs and share perspectives. The CBS groups provided a safe space to learn constructive social skills, including conflict resolution within families and the community. CBS is therefore an essential foundation for peacebuilding work, as it enhances individual capacities for peace.

3 Multi-actor approach is key to effective and sustainable peacebuilding

The project did not focus solely on community structures but also included relevant government actors, as conflict prevention and resolution require the involvement of both communities and local authorities. The Peace & Security offices at regional and woreda levels, the Supreme Court (mobile court), and the police participated in the project through joint training sessions, material support, and the organization of Peace Dialogues. Peace Committees and CCFs now have regular meetings with local authorities to refer cases and update them on the security situation. The engagement of authorities is crucial for sustainable peacebuilding, and they need to be fully integrated into all phases of peacebuilding work.

4 Food Security and Livelihoods (FSL) interventions serve as effective connectors between different groups: the Peace Nexus approach

FSL interventions, such as fishery cooperatives, VSLA, and agricultural activities, have led to increased agricultural production and income. Additionally, collaboration between people from different (ethnic) backgrounds in economic activities and market interactions between refugees and host communities has positively affected their mutual relations. People get to know each other and see the benefits of peaceful interaction, which has financial advantages. Thus, FSL interventions can be an effective entry point for peacebuilding, illustrating the Peace Nexus approach: linking FSL to peace.

5 Sport for peace has great potential for individual change and building positive relations

Acting as a catalyst for peace, sport teams and competitions foster deep connections between host and refugee communities, as well as among different ethnic groups, through teamwork and mutual respect. During competitions, regardless of one's identity, project participants and fans united to support their teams, creating a sense of belonging. This unity bridged divides and transformed negative interactions into positive relationships.

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