

Crucial, but vulnerable: The role of Chiefs in COVID response and conflict resolution



Chiefs play a critically important role in communities' right across South Sudan. They play a vital role in settling disputes, preventing armed conflict and fostering peace within and between communities. As the key intermediaries between local communities and higher levels of government, UN agencies and international NGOs, they have an essential role to play in informing, sensitizing and mobilizing community members around critical social issues, such as COVID-19. However, due to their age many chiefs are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.

This blog explores these issues, and offers recommendations for aid actors on how they can work with chiefs in conflict sensitive ways, whilst seeking to mitigate COVID-19 related risks for chiefs in communities across the country.

History and current roles of chiefs

Chiefs constitute the lowest tier of the local government in South Sudan. Although the structures and terms for chiefs vary from area to areas, paramount chiefs are usually the most senior, followed by the head chiefs or the executive chiefs, the sub-chiefs and the headmen. While subordinate chiefs report to the more senior chiefs, the executive chiefs and the county chiefs are accountable to the payam and the county administration.

As part of the local government, chiefs engage in many important activities, including administrative processes, service delivery, tax collection and, often, the allocation of humanitarian aid and community support. Chiefs are also active in local justice, conflict resolution and in peace building: they settle cases related to theft, family disagreements, divorce, contested property, livestock ownership and fighting according to customary law. In many places, they play an important role in mediating at peace conferences, where armed conflicts are settled. Chief courts meanwhile are an integral part of the judiciary. By settling disputes, chiefs contribute to justice by preventing the escalation of disputes into local-level armed violence.

Moreover, acting as crucial intermediaries between their communities on one side and higher levels of government, UN agencies and international NGOs on the other side, chiefs have a key role in informing and mobilizing community members for different endeavors including election registrations, vaccination campaigns, registration for food aid and the contribution of community resources to public work. Chiefs are, consequently, essential for ensuring that information about the COVID-19 pandemic reaches community members, particularly in rural areas.

How do chiefs inform and mobilize people?

Ahead of information and mobilization campaigns, the county or the payam administration commonly calls the most senior chiefs for a meeting. At such meetings, chiefs are informed about the information content they have to spread. Upon returning to their home areas, chiefs inform junior chiefs about the messages to share in their communities, with the headmen passing the information to the different households.

Traditional authorities who are not part of the local government

Other than administrative chiefs established by the colonial administration, different forms of traditional authorities exist at the local level in South Sudan. They include clan, lineage and family heads, cattle camp leaders and spiritual leaders such as spear masters, leopard skin chiefs, prophets and rainmakers who all date back to the pre-colonial power structures. They are not part of the local government but nevertheless play an important role at the local level as they settle disputes in informal arenas of justice, allocate natural resources as well as assets within communities and shape communal and family life. Spiritual leaders are influential and respected in different fields such as peace building by separating parties to conflict and by protecting communities, livestock, harvests and warriors. In some cases, administrative chiefs and traditional authorities compete for power, influence and resources within their communities.

What needs to be considered when working with chiefs in times of COVID-19?

Vulnerability of chiefs: Although younger people and women increasingly engage in political and governance issues, many chiefs are still elderly men. Due to their various activities, chiefs are often present in the public sphere and interact with many individuals. At

the same time, COVID-19 disproportionately affects elderly people and persons with chronic diseases. Hence, many chiefs belong to the vulnerable categories of South Sudan when it comes to COVID-19. It is important therefore that any efforts to engage chiefs (and other traditional leaders) in public information campaigns and community engagement processes should take special care to protect them from contracting the Corona Virus.

Considering traditional authorities: Even though traditional authorities such as lineage and family heads, cattle camp leaders and spiritual leaders are close to their people, trusted and respected, international actors are often not aware of them, or do not engage them. It can however be critically important to consider these groups in COVID-19 response activities (and indeed other initiatives), as they often play a major role in shaping life within their communities and families. For example, they give direction on how family and community members interact and share resources.

Referring to existing concepts/using local knowledge: Contagious diseases affecting human beings and livestock are not new phenomena in South Sudan. Experience, knowledge, mechanisms and practices exist to protect livestock and humans against diseases. Chiefs, traditional authorities and community members can be essential sources of knowledge and experience about previous pandemic experiences such as ebola, cholera or rinderpest, and the practices that communities have applied to mitigate the risks of these pandemics in the past. Such experiences can be critical in shaping response activities for COVID-19 that are already familiar for communities, and hence more likely to be taken up. Hence, working with chiefs and traditional authorities can allow agencies to adapt their messaging and practices on COVID-19 in communities to reflect local knowledge, terms, concepts and practices to which people can relate and own.

Chiefs' time is valuable: Chiefs are very busy. They have a wide range of roles and responsibilities, many of which are of crucial importance for their communities. International actors need to take this into account when engaging chiefs. For instance, asking chiefs to inform community members about COVID-19 can mean that they have less time available for settling disputes in chief's courts. Late Chief Denis Darmallo once lamented that international actors often expected him to participate in workshops and meetings. However, he had actual work to do in settling disputes in the chief court and working for the local government.

Recommendations

- **Chiefs are part of the local government:** To work with chiefs and to pass information through them, it is crucial to engage with the involved state level ministries (i.e. Ministry of Health) and the local government (county and the payam administration).
- **Relevant messaging:** For chiefs to be able to pass messages and information to community members, they need information that is available in local languages, relates to local knowledge, concepts and lessons learned from previous pandemics and is relevant and practical.
- **Practice effective shielding:** Given that many chiefs are elderly, protective measures are particularly important – including providing them with adequate information about the risks of COVID-19, as well as soap and masks, and practice social distancing when working with them. Moreover, agencies should coordinate their activities to

reduce their contact with chiefs and therefore chiefs' risk to exposure to COVID-19 infection.

- **Chiefs' time is valuable:** While it is important to work with chiefs as key intermediaries between community members and external actors, they have multiple demands on their time. Treating a chief's time as valuable will prevent chiefs to view agency expectations for their time and input as unreasonable or onerous.
- **Engaging traditional authorities in a conflict sensitive way:** As agencies often do not engage with traditional authorities, some of them might feel sidelined and ignore COVID-19 messaging, pass contractionary messages or even offer a cure against COVID-19. Thus, there is need for agencies to engage in a conflict sensitive way with chiefs and traditional authorities to manage competition between them.

July 3, 2020/by [Martina Santschi](#) and [CSRF](#)

<https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/blog/crucial-and-vulnerable-at-the-same-time-chiefs-information-campaigns-and-conflict-resolution-in-times-of-covid-19/>