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Community Resilience Mapping Lite in Akobo County

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Community Resilience Mapping Lite in Akobo County Report

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

APM	Area Program Manager
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FtF	Feed the Future
GPAA	Greater Pibor Administrative Area
IA4R	Institutional Architecture for Resilience
IP	Implementing Partner
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MoLG	Ministry of Local Government
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
NP	Nonviolent Peace Force
P2R	Pathway to Resilience
Payam HQs	Payam Headquarters
PDWs	Persons Living with Disabilities
PMP	Performance Management Plan
Policy LINK	Policy Leadership Interaction Networks and Knowledge
RASS	Resilience Agriculture for South Sudan
RFZs	Resilience Focus Zones
RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
SCI	Save the Children International
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government

Introduction

The global Feed the Future Policy Leadership Interaction Networks and Knowledge (Policy LINK) project has a mandate to strengthen agricultural policy systems and institutions in target countries. In South Sudan, Policy LINK seeks to facilitate effective and efficient collaboration between community representatives and USAID implementing partners in collaboration with the backbone support mechanism (MELS) in five out of the 13 USAID Resilience Focus Zones (RFZs)¹ namely: Akobo, Wau, Jur River, Budi and Kapoeta North.

Policy LINK undertakes five participatory planning steps that put local communities as frontline partners in a bottom-up approach to build community-led resilience through the identification of evidence-informed resilience priorities for better targeting and alignment of USAID investment resources in the Resilience Focus Zones (RFZ). This is in line with USAID’s strategic goal of strengthening the foundation for a more self-reliant South Sudan by integrating humanitarian and development assistance to promote household and community resilience.

Policy LINK’s approach ensures inclusion and active participation of the four corners of the community: traditional authority, private sector, local government, and civil society with emphasis on women, youth and persons with disabilities (PWDs). The five-step participatory process is pictured below:

Figure 1. Policy LINK’s Five-Step Participatory Process



Since 2021, the USAID Mission in South Sudan has been working through Policy LINK as a mechanism to facilitate effective and efficient collaboration between USAID implementing partners (IPs), and local community representatives to lay a strong foundation for building self-reliance in South Sudan, as envisaged in the Mission’s four-year scenario-based strategy.

USAID Policy LINK’s work has facilitated and enabled local community representatives in two of the 13 RFZ counties (Jur River and Wau) to participate in deeper community engagement, resilience mapping exercises to generate evidence for the articulation of aspirations and identification of priorities, local action planning, and joint work planning activities with USAID implementing partners.

Policy LINK seeks to replicate the best practices of community engagement in Jur River and Wau counties that created new incentives and value for community representatives together with USAID IPs as partners to collaborate and plan shared resilience priorities to achieve resilience objectives in Akobo County.

¹ Resilience Focus Zones (RFZ) encompass 13 counties spread across 5 states for targeting USAID investments in South Sudan where households and communities suffer from acute vulnerability and chronic food insecurity.

Recently, Policy LINK completed resilience mapping exercises in Akobo County to understand the needs of communities hit hard by shocks and stressors. This report documents Policy LINK’s best practices and lessons learned from the community-led resilience mapping exercise in Akobo County. It details the processes undertaken that ensured effective and inclusive community mobilization and engagement of key representatives from the four corners in meaningfully facilitated focus group discussions to better understand how communities collaborate and operate as a system, make decisions to absorb, adapt and transform from shocks and stressors such as floods, conflicts, human and livestock diseases outbreak, dry spells that affect food security and increase the acute vulnerability of communities in the county. The information from these exercises will be used for subsequent prioritization of needs, local action planning, and joint work planning.

Policy LINK’s community engagement in South Sudan reflects a new dimension and underscores the value that engaging a wide range of stakeholders in resilience programming can have for the effectiveness and durability of USAID’s scenario-based strategy and long-term development goals for South Sudan. As Policy LINK’s work portrayed notable progress in building local ownership and partnership which is crucial for the Mission’s four-year scenario-based strategy that focuses on the use of a community-focused approach to help targeted households and communities in the 13 target counties to move beyond a critical need for humanitarian aid and assume greater responsibility in shaping their future.²

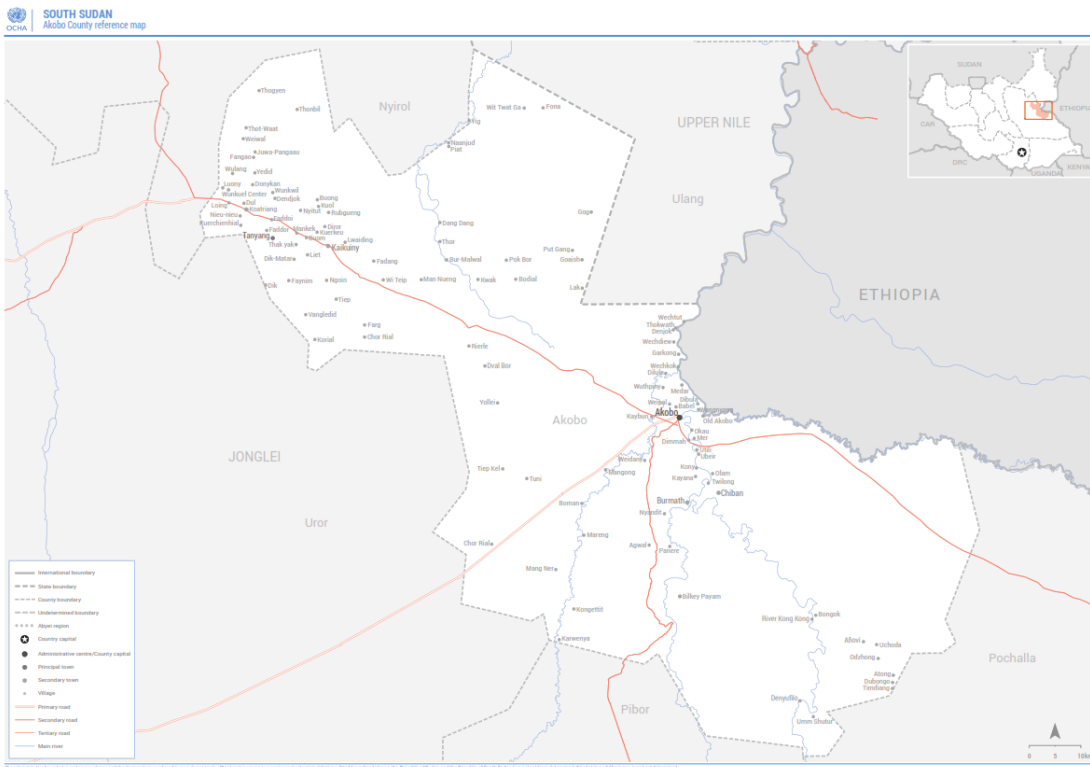
Moreover, the work of Feed the Future (FtF) focuses on the value of building a partnership that reflects a deepening consensus about a new paradigm for development that prioritizes inclusive country-driven programming and helps to reorient localization of development towards more participatory approaches in developing countries like South Sudan where communities, particularly in the 13 target counties, suffer from acute vulnerability and chronic food insecurity mainly due to climatic shocks and protracted conflicts that necessitate the building of food systems resilience in the face of those recurring shocks and stressors.

Area map of Akobo County

The map below shows Akobo County in Jonglei State where Policy LINK completed the resilience mapping exercise. The county is inhabited by the Luo-Nuer pastoralist community, it straddles South Sudan’s eastern border with Ethiopia and is one of 11 counties in Jonglei state classified under the eastern floodplain zone characterized by low-lying flat terrain.

² USAID South Sudan Strategic Framework, 2024.

Figure 2. Map of Akobo County



Resilience Mapping Lite in Akobo County

Evidence Gathering in Western Akobo County

Evidence gathering is part of Policy LINK’s participatory approach to help facilitate local community engagement and empowerment using data for bottom-up decision-making to identify and implement resilience priorities. Through its five-step participatory process, Policy LINK South Sudan undertakes a Community Resilience Mapping survey to assess and better understand the resilience capacities of households, communities, and institutions for responding to shocks and stressors using a modified version of the qualitative instrument component of the Community Resilience Measurement tool. The modified qualitative survey instrument targets representatives from the four corners of the community in an inclusive, participatory, and facilitated resilience conversation to gather perspectives on how communities operate as a system and the existing resilience capacities to prepare for, mitigate, and recover from shocks and stressors.

In February 2022, Policy LINK traveled to Bor to inform state-level stakeholders and then to Akobo West to conduct Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Through this exercise, Policy LINK mobilized the participation of key community representatives from the four corners in facilitated dialogues.

Operating from its base in Walgak, Policy LINK conducted FGDs in Diror, Boung, Barmach, and Walgak Payams. Over 128 community representatives including youth, women, private sector, and traditional authority were mobilized and organized into four FGDs consisting of eight persons per payam. The conversations lasted approximately two to two and a half hours each and featured deep dives on topics such as shocks and stressors in relation to existing community capacities, social cohesion, and youth unemployment.³

³ Refer to FGD guide for details of questions.

Steps Undertaken by Policy LINK

The FGD exercise included a review of the FGD guide, stakeholder sensitization, and deployment.

Step 1: Development and Review of Qualitative FGD Tool.

Prior to the field deployment, a data scientist hired by Policy LINK briefed the Area Program Manager (APM) and independent consultants. The consultants were native Nuer from Akobo hired by Policy LINK to facilitate effective community mobilization and FGDs. Policy LINK equipped the consultants with knowledge of USAID's Resilience Strategy and Policy LINK's participatory planning process, so they were better prepared to lead community mobilization and facilitate the FGDs.

Policy LINK learned from its stakeholder engagement lessons in Akobo County the value of hiring and working with locals because they have the indigenous knowledge as they come from the communities themselves and they can easily help with establishing, gaining, and building trust with communities which establishes a strong foundation for Policy LINK's work in Akobo County.

A final FGD guide was developed after thorough review. The modified FGD guide combined questions from the Community Resilience Mapping quantitative and qualitative survey instruments to enrich and bolster discussion on dimensions of resilience capacities (absorptive, adaptive, and transformative) in relation to shocks and stressors.

The FGD questions covered the following areas: livelihood diversification, food security and livelihoods, shocks and stressors, resilience capacities, social cohesion, cooperation, and conflict in the community.

Step 2: Stakeholder Consultation and Socialization of FGD Tool

Policy LINK conducted one-on-one meetings and shared plans for conducting FGDs in Akobo County with key state-level offices including the office of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), and the Ministry of Local Government (MoLG).

After the meetings, Policy LINK obtained endorsements to commence the FGDs from the offices of the RRC, MoLG, and NBS at the state level. In addition, the RRC issued a "Letter of No Objection" for the operationalization of Policy LINK's activities in Jonglei State and Akobo County.

In Akobo West, Policy LINK organized a one-day meeting that drew the participation of key community representatives including executive directors, payam administrators, White Army and youth representatives, women leaders, PWDs, the private sector, the paramount chief, church leaders, and three RRC representatives.

In the meeting, Policy LINK shared the purpose of conducting the FGDs in Akobo County. The meeting offered an opportunity for the community leaders to view and make sense of the FGD guide and obtain their buy-in. At the end of the meeting, the community leaders embraced the value of the FGDs and endorsed the process to collect data and information from the community at payam levels. The leaders also commended Policy LINK for continued collaboration and coordination of its activities in Akobo West.

Step 3: Deployment of FGD Tool at Payam Levels.

Policy LINK mobilized 128 key community representatives from local government, traditional authority, private sector, and civil society with emphasis on women, youth, the White Army, and PWDs. In total,

Voices from the Local Community

"Policy LINK is creating a more robust forum organizing different community sectors in dialogue groups to discuss new topics on resilience where every unheard voice from the community is heard and gathered for decision-making processes. The church must be part of this process," said a church leader during a community meeting facilitated by Policy LINK in Akobo West.

"It is a unique experience for us especially the White Army youth representatives, to participate in discussion on matters such as conflicts that are affecting our communities and ways on how we can better build our communities to be able to survive such problems." -White Army youth leader during a community meeting.

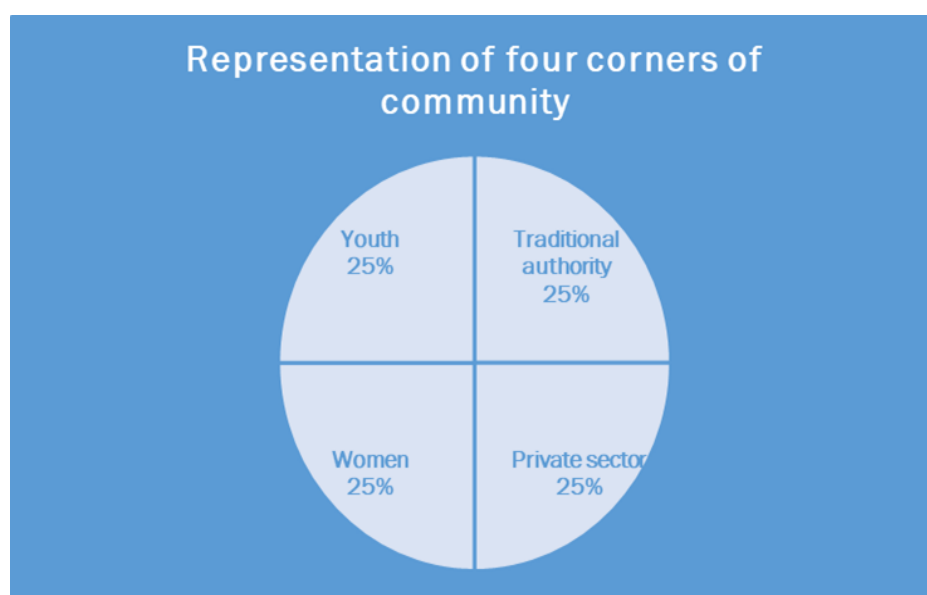
Policy LINK organized 16 FGDs. The discussions were facilitated in Luo Nuer for a more meaningful understanding and interpretation of the questions, which led to more effective discussions. Policy LINK traveled to each of the Payam administrative headquarters and provided transportation allowance and refreshments for community representatives from different bomas and villages who had to travel long distances to reach the Payam headquarters where the focus group discussions were conducted. The table below shows the demographic breakdown of the FGD participants in Akobo West.

Table 1: Focus Group Discussion Representative by Institutional Category.

Institution category	Boung payam		Walgak payam		Diror payam		Barmach payam		Total
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Private sector	2	6	1	7	1	7	4	4	32
Traditional authority	8	0	0	8	0	8	0	8	32
Women	8	0	8	0	8	0	8	0	32
Youth	1	7	1	7	1	7	0	8	32
Total	19	13	10	22	10	22	12	20	128

As show in the chart below, Policy LINK ensured equal participation of community representatives from the four corners of community. This process gave an inclusive opportunity for the community members including the underrepresented groups such as youth, women, and persons with disabilities to voice their opinions and share perspectives on topics related to shocks and stressors.

Figure 3. Percentage of FGD Representatives from the Four Corners of the Community



Key Informant Interviews

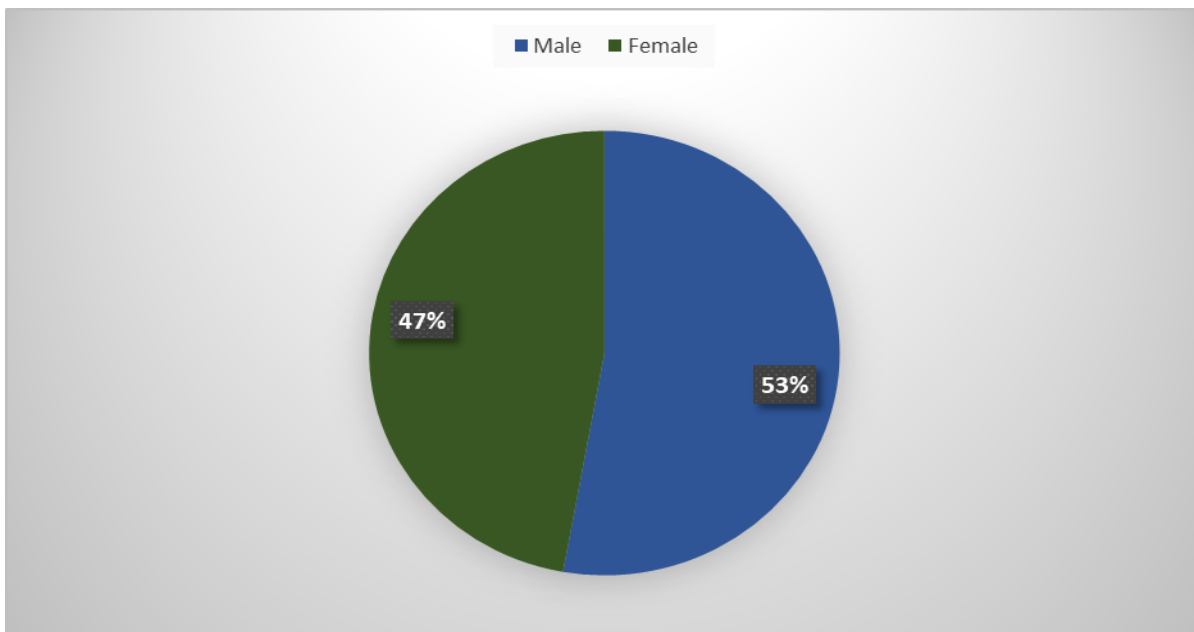
Policy LINK organized key informant interviews (KIIs) at the grassroots with the payam administrators as representatives of the local government in Akobo West to obtain additional insights. The payam administrators as arms of the local government at payam levels are well-informed about topics of the discussions and issues within the local community. They have firsthand information that can triangulate data and information collected in facilitated dialogues with different groups of community representatives.

Evidence Gathering in Eastern Akobo County

The FGDs in eastern Akobo County covered four payams namely: Nyandit, Dengjok, Bilkey, and Dakjong. Policy LINK gathered over 142 key community sectors represented by women and youth association leaders, businessmen, pastoralists, farmers from the private sector, payam administrators, and traditional chiefs at payam levels who participated in the facilitated dialogues to deeply explore topics on shocks and stressors to assess and better understand capacities of households, community, and institutions in relation to shocks and stressors. Special emphasis was put on the inclusion and participation of women and youth as a population disproportionately affected by the recurrent shocks and stressors in the county to ensure representation of their voices and views in the discussion topics to yield measurable and representative information and data as evidence to facilitate collective discussions, decision-making, and planning for resilience programming in Akobo County.

As evidenced in Jur River and Wau counties, Policy LINK's community-led resilience mapping exercise, particularly the FGDs, in Akobo County can help to generate data and information for the empowerment of the local communities hit hard by climate shocks and decades of conflicts first; to measure their absorptive, adaptive, and transformative resilient capacities, and secondly to drive community-led processes for the articulation of aspirations and identification of resilient priorities through town hall workshops, and joint work planning for resilience programming in the county. Even further, these discussions can institute a sense of agency and can trigger aspirational thinking among the local communities to kick-start a journey of self-reliance by changing the culture and addressing the syndrome of dependency on humanitarian assistance. The disaggregated data below represent the percentage of males and females who participated in the FGDs in eastern Akobo County.

Figure 4. Percentage Representation of Male and Female Ratio in the FGDs in Eastern Akobo



Challenges

Operationally, challenges were met in procurement and payment for services due to the dysfunctionality of the market and the remoteness of the county. For example, it was difficult to transfer money from Juba to Akobo that was needed for the timely payment of vendors given that there are no financial institutions or agents with capacities for remitting huge amount of money. Vehicle hires were limited for carrying out community outreach and mobilization activities. It is recommended that in the future, Policy LINK should

consider co-location and collaboration with other agencies operating on the ground to improve efficiency in operations for the timely implementation of activities.

There was a leadership vacuum at the county level created by a State-issued decree that relieved former County Commissioner Gatwech Reat in replacement by Jonh. This change brought some division among the local communities as the decision for relieving and appointment of the commissioners was not welcomed and protested by the grassroots communities. Moreover, after the arrival of the new commissioner in the county, there were several changes made in the local government structure. This shift and unpredictable changes affected the mobilization of communities to some extent. Policy LINK adapted its activity plan with these changes and ensured community mobilization and engagement activities were coordinated with the County Executive Director, payam administrators, and paramount and grassroots chiefs in the absence of the Commissioner.

Internal and external insecurity of the area related to revenge killing and cattle rustling posed a major challenge during the resilience mapping exercise. Several unresolved cases of revenge disputes and killing impeded social gatherings in the communities for meetings. Youth were the most affected group and are socially disconnected from each other by clans and payams. For example, in Gakdong Payam, Cie buor clan who shares the same payam with Cie longor clan in the proximity of less than a kilometer does not collaborate with one another and has lived with internal disputes for many years. Externally, fear of Murle attacks disrupted the mobilization and gathering of communities for Policy LINK activities. However, Policy LINK activities were well coordinated with the local authorities to ensure that risks associated with inter-clan fighting and killing, Murle cattle rustling, and attacks were minimized and mitigated. Working in Akobo requires continuous updates to the risk matrix and an adaptive activity management posture to ensure the safety of staff and local communities.

The Murle community has continued launching cattle raids in the area, which contributed to the displacement of people from rural bomas and villages to payam headquarters. This disrupted the mobilization and gathering of communities for Policy LINK activities.

There was a massive mobilization of youth from Luo Nuer and Jikany in February for cattle raiding in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). This mobilization created fear and panic among the local communities and the humanitarian agencies working in Akobo West and it slowed down planning for activities. However, the community leaders persuaded the White Army youth leadership to demobilize and disengage from launching cattle-raiding activities with the neighboring Murle community, which eventually led to the restoration of calmness and scaling up of project activities for different agencies working in the area.

Limited services such as internet, office space, and accommodation were major hurdles for effective and efficient operationalization of Policy LINK activities. In Akobo West, Save the Children International (SCI) and Nonviolent Peace Force (NP) are the only agencies with limited capacities to provide accommodation, office space, and internet services. Even this limited capacity is overstretched and faces huge pressure due to high demand from both agencies operating Akobo West without physical presence and the local communities, especially the youth who are looking for jobs through internet connections. Without a physical presence in the area, future work in Akobo West requires co-locating with partners with an existing presence in the area and Thuraya satellite phones.

Lessons Learned

Work with Relevant Stakeholders at All Levels and Treat Them as Partners or Co-creators

Community mobilization and engagement is more effective and collective when we work with relevant stakeholders at all levels and consider them as partners or co-creators. It instills a sense of agency and ownership and boosts mobilization efforts and the morale of the stakeholders to rally behind the project. To build trust and transparency, it is important to involve relevant stakeholders in activity design and implementation.

Participatory Community Engagement in Fragile Areas Requires Patience and Flexibility.

Participatory community engagement in fragile areas such as Akobo County requires patience and flexibility. You cannot accelerate activities; activity planning must be flexible and adaptive to the changing context. Moreover, participatory community engagement requires more time, and acceptance to live with local communities and learn their cultural values and norms. Listen to the unheard voices, especially from civil society groups such as youth and women and inclusively engage them to forge a holistic roadmap for empowerment to promote household and community resilience in Akobo County in line with USAID's strategy for South Sudan.

Longer FGD Sessions Allow Community Members to Voice their Concerns

The facilitated dialogues (FGDs) that lasted for an average of two hours were welcomed as a robust forum by the community representatives because it allowed them to discuss issues affecting them, which established a strong foundation for community mobilization and participation.

Coordination with USAID IPs Supports Effective Community Engagement and Collaboration

In Akobo County, Policy LINK maintained continued momentum toward effective community engagement and collaborations with USAID IPs by effective coordination and engaging the relevant stakeholders during the resilience mapping exercises. For example, Policy LINK shared plans and tools for undertaking the community resilience mapping exercise at the county and payam levels and sought an endorsement through buy-in letters from the relevant authorities to carry out the mapping exercise after making sense of the community resilience mapping plan tools. Further, Policy LINK met with DT Global Sheja Salaam, the Resilience Agriculture for South Sudan (RASS), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), and the Pathways to Resilience (P2R) team in the county, shared and discussed the resilience mapping tool and plan, and expanded discussion on Policy LINK's next activity plans in the county for facilitating resilience programming. This engagement and collaboration inspired a sense of commitment among the community leaders in effective community engagement for resilience activities and is important in nurturing effective partnerships in the county.

Promoting Meaningful Women's Participation in Resilience Programming Empowers Marginalized Groups

Policy LINK brought together networks of women from many walks of life including key women's associations' leaders, women working in formal and business sectors, and those outside of formal groups at the county and payam levels to discuss distinct issues on topics in relation to shocks and stressors and how women have been disproportionately affected by the impacts of shocks in their communities. This special emphasis on the encouragement of women's participation in resilience topic discussions and programming was widely appreciated by the women's representatives during the resilience mapping exercise in Akobo. The lessons show Policy LINK's efforts in challenging patriarchy and promoting meaningful women's participation are essential, to the extent that it empowers marginalized groups and recognizes and prioritizes women's important role in resilience-focused programming.

Engaging the Private Sector in Building Community-led Resilience Can Scale Up Efforts

Achieving inclusive growth for local communities in South Sudan requires a whole-of-society approach, strengthening the private sector as a powerful force for driving and accelerating resilience programming, especially in the hard-to-reach areas such as Akobo can scale up efforts to transform and strengthen lives. Policy LINK's participatory approach engages a wider range of private sector stakeholders in a facilitative process to build community-led resilience. In Akobo, Policy LINK engaged different private sector groups from the chamber of commerce, pastoralists and fishermen, and relevant businessmen in the resilience mapping exercise to gather information and data that can be used to spur discussions to articulate community aspirations and resilience priorities for local action planning and joint work planning in the county.

Conclusion

Policy LINK South Sudan’s sustained efforts to facilitate effective community engagement and conventions for the articulation of aspirations using evidence-based data from the resilience mapping exercise can unlock the full potential of resilience programming in Akobo County. In line with USAID’s four-year scenario-based strategy in South Sudan that prioritizes community-focused approaches to help households and communities in the resilience focus zones to assume greater partnership and responsibilities for their future, Policy LINK can translate the principle of community-driven approaches into practical mechanisms and programming that is more participatory, inclusive, transparent, accountable, and sustainable. This is a process that will put local communities as partners to articulate their own aspirations, identify priorities, and subsequently lead a locally owned planning process for joint work planning with USAID implementing partners in Akobo County.