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The U.S. Government's Global Hunger & Food Security Initiative

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## A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY- LED RESILIENCE: LESSONS FROM SOUTH SUDAN

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**Volume I – Inclusivity and Stakeholder Engagement**

*Good practices for establishing a foundation of trust for effective  
collaboration between communities and implementing partners*



South Sudan

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**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

**Policy LINK**  
LEADERSHIP & COLLABORATION  
FOR BETTER POLICY SYSTEMS

## I. Background

The USAID Policy LINK project has a global mandate to strengthen agricultural policy systems and institutions in target countries. In South Sudan, Policy LINK aims to promote collaborative governance, facilitative leadership, evidence-based decision-making, and convergence of community and donor resources for joint work planning between implementing partners and local communities in five of the thirteen counties encompassing the USAID Resilience Focus Zones (RFZs), namely, Akobo, Budi, Jur River, Kapoeta North, and Wau counties.

Policy LINK undertakes five participatory steps to help facilitate communities' capacity building and autonomy to identify and implement a community-led resilience agenda.

### These five steps include:

1. Inclusive and participatory community and other stakeholder engagement,
2. Collecting data for resilience decision-making,
3. Sense-making workshops for articulating resilience aspirations and identification of priorities,
4. Local action planning for driving a bottom-up community action plan, and
5. Joint work planning for alignment and better targeting of USAID investments.

### About the Policy LINK USAID/South Sudan Activity

**Stakeholder Engagement**  
Community engagement establishes a foundation of trust for cooperation and coordination.

**Joint Work Planning**  
County-level local community action plan serves as the basis for multistakeholder work planning with USAID IPs and other local partners.

**Gathering Evidence**  
All Policy LINK work is anchored in the principle of evidence-informed decision making.

**Sense-Making Workshops**  
Sense-making workshops empower community representatives to use evidence to voice aspirations and identify resilience priorities.

**Local Action Planning**  
Payam-level action planning workshops confirm payam level resilience priorities and identify, select, and send delegates for participation in the county-level workshop that finalizes a coherent local community action plan.

Through the implementation of this 5-step framework, the Policy LINK South Sudan team has learned many valuable lessons about operating in the challenging South Sudan context. Policy LINK is in a unique position to support other USAID implementing partners (IPs) operating in South Sudan and other similar development contexts by sharing its lessons learned and good practices.

## II. Introduction

This Resource Guide series aims to provide guidance on good practices for building community-led resilience based on the experiences of Policy LINK in South Sudan. This first volume – on Inclusivity and Stakeholder Engagement – reflects on lessons learned from Policy LINK’s approach to stakeholder engagement in the South Sudan counties of Akobo, Budi and Kapoeta North. It captures good practices for effective multi-stakeholder engagement and establishing a foundation of trust, which is necessary for effective collaboration between communities and implementing partners. It also outlines challenges and recommendations unique to each county, which IPs can apply to their work in the region. Future volumes will focus on Evidence-informed Decision-making and Mutual Accountability. While the main audience for these Resource Guides is USAID IPs operating in South Sudan, the good practices contained in these Resource Guides may be applicable in many countries where USAID is working to build community-led resilience.

## III. Inclusivity and Stakeholder Engagement

In South Sudan, USAID integrates humanitarian and development assistance to promote household and community resilience. **USAID’s goal is to strengthen the foundation for a more self-reliant South Sudan.** This will be achieved through fulfilling the following Development Objectives:

- DOI: Meeting basic needs of communities in crisis, while decreasing aid dependence
- DO2: Household resilience increased in targeted areas
- DO3: Improved social cohesion in targeted areas
- DO4: Government of South Sudan more responsive to its citizens

### USAID/South Sudan’s Development Hypothesis

The Mission posits that **IF** USAID/South Sudan focuses its resources in Resilience Focus Zones (RFZs) **AND** meets basic humanitarian needs and thereby prevents households from employing negative coping strategies that set them back on the development ladder; **AND** it boosts the resilience of households to shocks by boosting their ability and tendency to pursue diverse livelihood opportunities and employ positive planning and coping strategies in the face of shocks; **AND** it helps communities strengthen bonds within and between communities; **AND** it gives households and communities more responsibility and ability to control their development “journey;” **THEN** the RFZs will be less dependent on aid and will have a stronger foundation for eventual “self-reliance.”

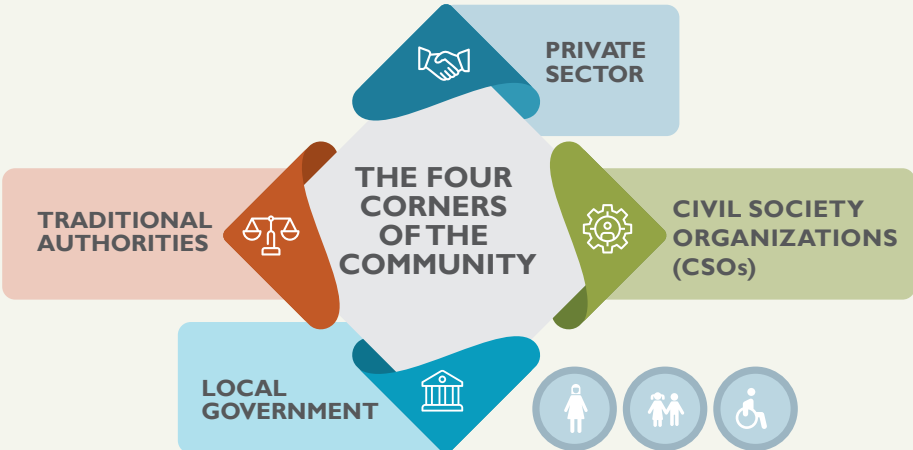
South Sudan’s journey to self-reliance starts at the community level, boosting community and household-level resilience so that families are better equipped to weather the shocks that will inevitably come. USAID’s approach puts communities at the center of the development process to address their own challenges and develop resilience to future shocks. This approach requires effective multi-stakeholder engagement that builds the foundation for community-led resilience programming in South Sudan.

This document lays out good practices for achieving effective multi-stakeholder engagement, as demonstrated by Policy LINK. The engagement process that Policy LINK followed included consultations and discussions with the four corners of the community, including traditional authorities, local government, private sector, and civil society organizations (CSOs), with special emphasis on women, youth, and persons with disabilities (PWD). These partnerships and coordination can ultimately contribute to locally appropriate actions to increase communities’ ability to recover from recurring shocks and stressors.

Specific stakeholder engagement actions taken by Policy LINK are outlined in the box below.

### Policy LINK’s Stakeholder Engagement Process in South Sudan

Starting at the state level, Policy LINK engaged the Office of the Governor, Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), National Bureau of Statistics, other relevant ministry representatives, national and international NGOs, and the four corners of the community: Civil Society Organizations, traditional authorities, local government, and the private sector.



Policy LINK scheduled one-on-one meetings and focus group discussions (FGDs) with stakeholders to make introductions to the Policy LINK team, share USAID’s objectives for community-led resilience, explain the Policy LINK community engagement approach, and review planned activities in each county. These initial meetings paved the way for Policy LINK to engage with leadership at the county level, including obtaining the phone numbers and email addresses of key personnel from the line ministries, civil society organizations, and private sector (a list of these contacts is available to USAID IPs by request). These meetings also served as an opportunity to obtain the endorsement of key government officials, which was critical to ensuring safe transit between counties and payams.

At the county level, Policy LINK secured the approval and endorsement of the county Commissioner and the State RRC to facilitate community meetings at the payam level. The objective of the payam level stakeholder engagement was to introduce Policy LINK and its planned activities to the payam authorities, including the community leadership structures, women, and youth, and to consult with the community members and understand context-specific challenges and the opportunities for collaborating with local community representatives.



## IV. Good Practices for Stakeholder Engagement

### Transparency and Awareness of USAID Strategy

- 1. Build understanding and awareness of USAID’s Strategy.** A change in mindset away from dependency on humanitarian assistance to self-reliance is needed in South Sudan. Building community-led resilience, as envisaged in USAID’s strategy, requires not just inclusive community mobilization and participation in USAID resilience activities, but it also **requires sensitization of the local communities** given decades of dependency on humanitarian assistance. This will allow a shift from humanitarian investment to resilience investment not only from USAID, but also among IPs and the local communities. Policy LINK’s stakeholder engagement created an important platform to raise awareness about the USAID strategy for community-led resilience among the four corners of the community and enabled a deep **understanding and awareness about USAID’s strategy** in these areas, which will help to shift mindsets.
- 2. Be transparent.** Make sure the community understands USAID’s objectives and the IP’s goals and activities. There is often overlap between the communities’ aspirations, state-level strategic plans, and USAID’s objectives. Once the community and leadership are aware of these shared goals, they can work together more effectively to achieve them. In addition, make sure all local and county-level staff supporting the IP understand USAID’s objectives so they can help to build awareness and socialize the strategy within the communities. This also helps to manage expectations within the community. Stakeholder engagement creates transparency, accountability to the community, as well as a feedback mechanism. If people do not know what an IP is coming to do or understand its objectives, that can create mistrust and the expectation of a hidden agenda.





## Importance of Inclusivity

1. **Include the four corners of the community** (Traditional Authority, Local Government, CSOs, and Private Sector). Policy LINK's approach to stakeholder engagement is unique in including all four corners of the community. Since the establishment of the Chamber of Commerce in Budi, Policy LINK was the first IP to meet with and engage the private sector and understand their challenges and what they can contribute to increasing community resilience.
2. **Be inclusive of women, youth, and Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)**. A deliberate focus must be on ensuring the participation of disenfranchised social groups such as women, youth, and PWDs. Policy LINK's stakeholder engagement approach was unique because it created a forum for every stakeholder to voice their opinions, including women, youth, and PWDs. The inclusive and participatory approach of Policy LINK's work has been widely accepted and embraced among social groups of the local community including women, youth, and PWDs as it provides the opportunity for listening and receiving feedback from the different groups. It is important to have well-written, clear selection criteria for inclusivity in community mobilization when working through the local institutions for stakeholder engagement activities to ensure this balance.
3. **Use different approaches for stakeholder engagement and participatory tools** to reach the four corners and every segment of stakeholders. Policy LINK utilized FGDs, one-on-one meetings with specific institutions, and bilateral meetings, and participated in monthly coordination meetings chaired by the county commissioners. This created an openness to speak to one another and listen to one another, making it possible for people to openly express their views.





## Importance of Working with and through Community-based Institutions

1. **Understand and work through county authorities, community institutions, and traditional authorities** that can help you navigate and utilize the local system. Chiefs play a critical role when it comes to ensuring that communities mobilize. There is a high level of trust with chiefs – more than any other leaders in the area. The communities were very cooperative and active participants during the meetings when the community leadership structures were involved from the beginning of the activity. If you support the traditional authority and local system and give them space to mobilize, you will find that they are well organized. This also helps to build social cohesion and trust with IPs. Failure to **obtain the buy-in of community leaders and traditional authorities** may disrupt planned activities.
2. Provide an opportunity and **space for communities to voice their concerns**. Communities want to talk with the IPs. Even if the IPs cannot meet their needs or demands, this opportunity to voice their concerns and be heard by IPs can help to build trust and understanding. Further to this point, allow **adequate time for discussion at workshops** to give people space to speak their minds. This discussion helps to lay the foundation for trust and cooperation within the communities. If they have more time to discuss among themselves, they can easily reach a consensus, which in turn can help to repair social cohesion in these communities.



### Sequence of Stakeholder Engagement

1. **Start at the state level and work down to the county and then payam level.**

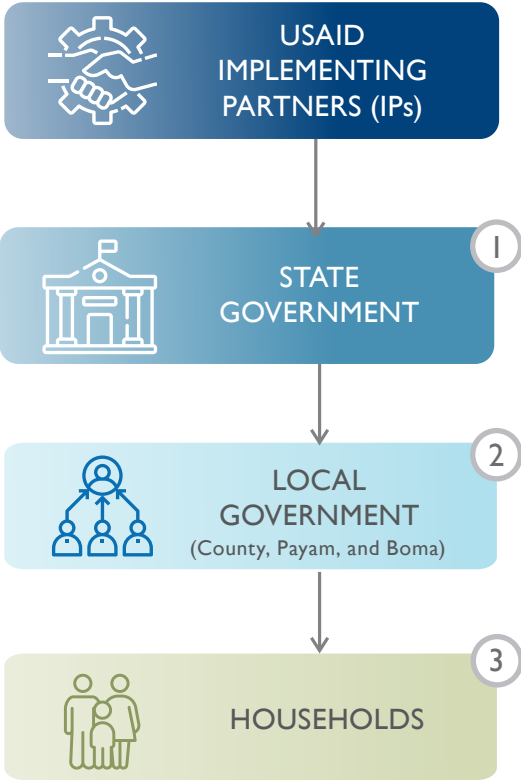
State level engagement is helpful to build influential relationships with state authorities and gain acceptance/endorsement.

“RRC is a gate opener and is the one who gives greenlight for agencies to operate in various counties.”  
 – *Honorable Tuor Majok Jonglei State RRC Chairperson*

2. **Obtain endorsement letters from government officials** to facilitate transit between payams.

Implementing Partners and their vehicles can be detained by security forces when moving without endorsement letters and providing advance notice to local authorities.

3. IPs should always **engage with the state and local government before engaging with households.** This is critical to avoid issues with government authorities and gain unimpeded access to the communities.





## IP Operational and Planning Considerations

1. Whenever possible, **recruit staff and Short-term Technical Assistants (STTAs)**. This helps with gaining trust of the communities, by having someone who is seen as a member of the community working alongside the IP and helps to identify and overcome any region/ context-specific challenges that the IP may not be aware of. This is also beneficial for translation support when needed.
2. **Consider working with local NGOs**, already existing community associations/ groups, grassroots organizations (like Akobo youth, Akobo Women's Association, traders union), and volunteers. They know the context very well and can help with community engagement and navigating the local systems, especially when the situation becomes volatile.
3. Establish a good **working relationship and coordination with the county authorities and IPs**, both national NGOs and the international NGOs, so they can help carry messages to the communities when it is not safe to travel and so they can keep you informed of the situation in the payams.
4. **Invest in communication infrastructure**. Either send staff with satellite phones, establish a field-level agreement with INGOs operating locally who have internet, or establish offices in the hard-to-reach locations.
5. IPs should be **aware of county-specific rules on office locations**. For example, in Kapoeta North, all IPs that are operating and have activities in the county should consider opening an office in the county or at least work with a local NGO. This is a new policy that will be put into effect from 2022 and is stipulated in the County's Strategic Plan, according to the County Commissioner.
6. **Timing of activities is critical**. Find out the timing of community activities and align but do not conflict with other social activities in the communities. Also, keep in mind festive season activities such as Christmas celebrations in December, seasonal conflicts like cattle-raiding, planting season in April, or harvest period in July and August when many residents are busy and may not attend workshops.
7. Develop and implement a **dedicated communications plan** and structure for information sharing about the program and enhance accessibility to information through mediums and formats, such as radio, printed handouts, and facilitation of workshops by community-based organizations and representatives.
8. **IPs are encouraged to provide refreshments**, such as water, soda, and biscuits, as well as transport refunds to further incentivize mobilization and participation of community members.

“[Policy LINK] is unique. They hire nationals as consultants. When IPs hire local people, who are from communities, they understand the needs better than outsiders.”

– Honorable Tuor Majok Jonglei State RRC Chairperson

## V. Challenges to Stakeholder Engagement

### I. Dependency on Humanitarian Assistance

There is a **dependency syndrome** in many counties of South Sudan that stems from decades of reliance on humanitarian assistance. There is a high expectation of the community representatives for IPs to provide livelihoods support and provision of health services, water facilities and education services, etc. A mindset shift will be necessary to bring communities to understand the role they can play in building resilience.

#### Recommendation:

- Build awareness of USAID's strategy and the project's specific objectives to manage the expectations of community representatives and help the communities see their role in community-led resilience.

### 2. Difficult Geography and Poor Roads

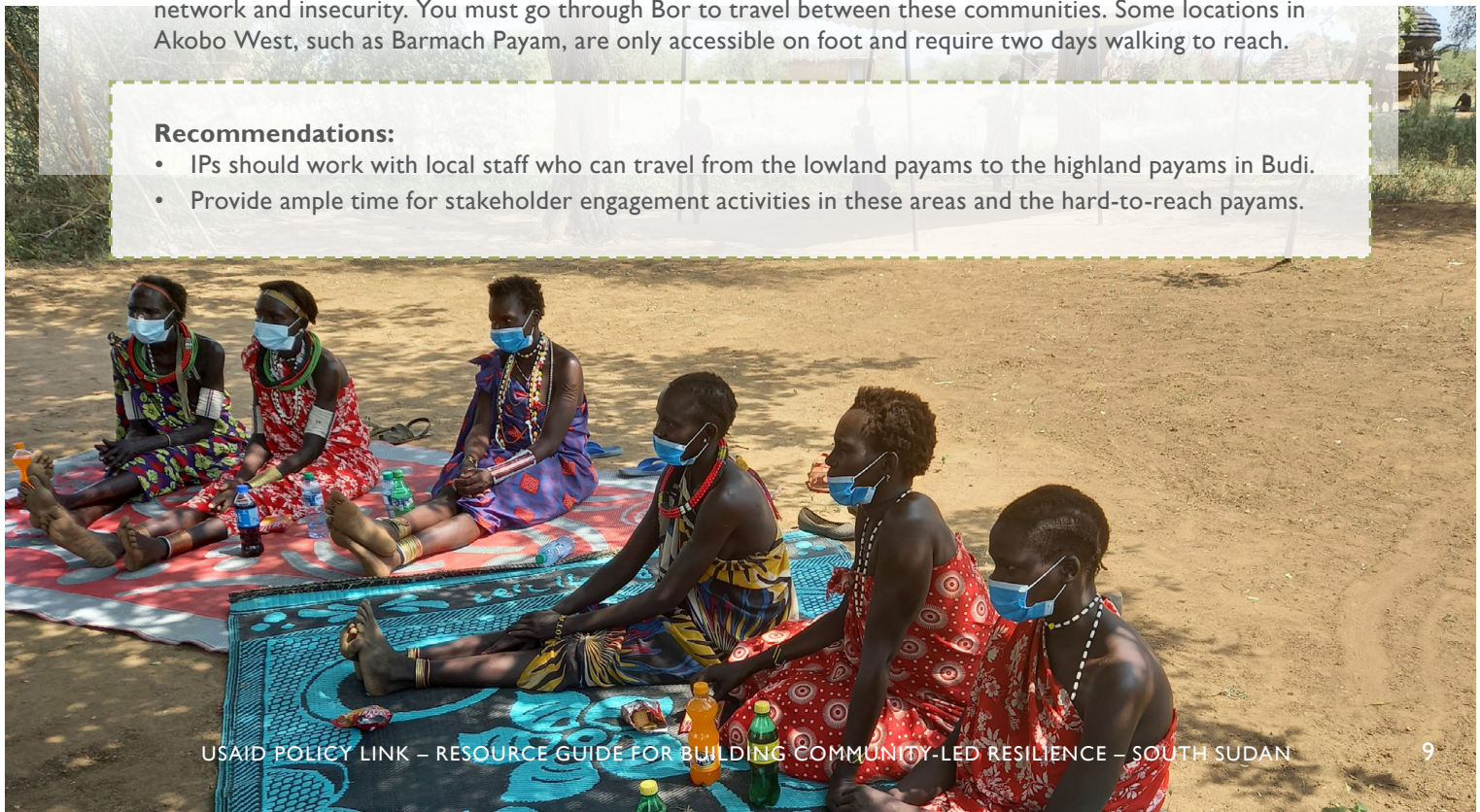
Many of the RFZ counties have **difficult geography and poor road conditions**, which makes it difficult to reach remote communities. In Budi County, for example, four of the seven payams are in mountainous areas and there is no road to the highland payams; you must travel on foot to reach these areas. The existing roads within the county have not been maintained, which makes it difficult to reach other payams. This is a big constraint to IPs and has led most IPs to concentrate their work in two central payams, leaving out the other five payams. Many community members feel like they are not engaged by IPs, but it is because they are far from the central payam. This creates the impression that services are deliberately not intended to reach them.

In Kapoeta North County the two farthest payams – Karukomuge and Nakua – are difficult to access due to distance and an unpredictable insecurity situation. During the dry season, the roads are fine, but during the rainy season it can be challenging because the roads can become very muddy, making vehicle movement difficult.

Akobo is one of the biggest counties in Jonglei state and it is difficult to travel due to under-developed road infrastructure. It is not possible to move from Akobo East to Akobo West because of the poor road network and insecurity. You must go through Bor to travel between these communities. Some locations in Akobo West, such as Barmach Payam, are only accessible on foot and require two days walking to reach.

#### Recommendations:

- IPs should work with local staff who can travel from the lowland payams to the highland payams in Budi.
- Provide ample time for stakeholder engagement activities in these areas and the hard-to-reach payams.





### 3. Political and Insecurity Situation

Each of the three counties faced similar challenges related to insecurity due to cattle raiding and attacks on villages. In Budi, Lotukei and Komiri payams along the Kikilai area are a hotspot for cattle raiding between the Logir and Didinga youth. These issues of insecurity have hampered the movement of the people from one place to the other and hindered their ability to get goods to market. Insecurity due to cattle raiding and intercommunal conflict has also been a hindrance to NGO operations. For example, the killing of a CORDIAD staff while traveling from Chukudum to Kimotong in May 2021 was one of the recent incidents involving humanitarian workers. Trauma and psychosocial issues are high in Budi due to the cattle raiding and attacks on villages. There are a lot of widows and orphans, and there is a need for activities to engage the youth to prevent them from participating in cattle raiding and other activities.

In addition to cattle-raiding from neighboring communities, child abduction is also common in Kapoeta North, which leads to the community not attending activities because of fear of leaving children at home. Unlike other counties in South Sudan, the payam and boma level government structures in Kapoeta North are not well established, and instead of payam and/or boma administrators, they are mainly governed through the traditional hierarchy i.e. paramount chief, boma chief, and Headman, etc.

Jonglei State, where Akobo County is located, is one of the most volatile states in South Sudan, with issues related to inter-tribal conflicts, cattle raiding, and revenge killing. There are warring factions and inter-community cattle raiding, which increases the community's dependency on humanitarian assistance. This creates a lot of fear and panic, which subjects the communities to vulnerability despite all the available natural resources.

#### Recommendations:

- Joint convoys of NGO vehicles traveling between payams can mitigate some of the security challenges, Traveling individually can be dangerous.
- The community representatives highlighted the need to empower youth through vocational training, games, and sporting activities that lead to peaceful co-existence.





#### 4. Environmental and Climate Shocks

South Sudan is vulnerable to weather extremes, such as flooding and drought. The communities of Budi are also faced with environmental challenges, such as limited sources of clean water, deforestation by the community, which is affecting the rainfall patterns, and starvation due to drought. In Kapoeta North, crop yield and production have been low due to frequent long dry spells and pest attacks. In Akobo, flooding has been a problem, particularly in Akobo West, and has led to the relocation of ministerial offices in Bor, and has made locations in Akobo West, such as Barmach, inaccessible. The flooding caused mass displacement, which made it difficult to locate communities from their original areas.

##### Recommendations:

- Establish strong trusted relations with local stakeholders to obtain precise situational awareness. Prioritize engagements in Akobo West during the dry season because Akobo East can be accessed during the wet or dry season.
- Equip field teams with the required gear for traversing flood-prone communities.
- Reach out to local stakeholders in advance of field team deployment to seek availability of the necessary logistical and operational support.
- Invest in training for local stakeholders so that they can be effective ambassadors for your projects.

#### 5. Poor or Non-existent Communications Infrastructure

Communications were challenging across all three counties. Out of Budi's seven payams, only one – the central payam where Chukudum is located – has a communication network. Internet is not stable in Budi. Very few IPs have internet, and you must make arrangements with local partners to access their internet connections. Limited or no phone network is also a concern that hampers communication.

Mobile network coverage in Akobo West is very poor to non-existent. This made it difficult to coordinate for focus group discussions and meetings. This required networking on the ground and necessitated advanced coordination and communication with stakeholders.

##### Recommendations:

- If you will be engaging regularly with communities in the hard-to-reach payams, establish a field-level agreement with INGOs operating locally that have internet.
- Coordinate with stakeholders well in advance in areas where mobile network coverage is poor. Provide satellite phones to staff who are traveling to or working in the remote payams where there is no communications network.
- Consider equipping field staff with wifi modems for areas where mobile networks are available.





## 6. IP Operational and Planning Considerations

Through Policy LINK’s outreach and stakeholder engagement, it became clear that many communities had been overlooked or not consulted in the past. Due to limited infrastructure, such as roads and communication, community leaders in Kapoeta North tend to mobilize the nearest community representatives, leaving out the distant communities. Many community members feel like they are not engaged by IPs, but it is because they are far from the central payam. This creates the impression that services are deliberately not intended to reach them.

Due to cultural practices, the male community leaders tend to influence female opinion when they meet as one group, making it difficult to gain female input. In Akobo East, many organizations and IPs meet with the women’s association, but they do not come back to provide feedback.

In Akobo there is low coverage of beneficiaries by donor agencies. Most organizations are in East Akobo and do not reach the beneficiaries of West Akobo. Furthermore, youth in Akobo West are eager to be engaged but are rarely approached by other organizations or IPs. They have the potential and energy to do the work, but they lack capacity building and tools to start up on their own resilience activities.

*“The western part of Akobo county is underserved, many organizations are located in East Akobo, but they do not address the needs in Akobo west.” – Honorable. Gatwech Reat Deng – Akobo county commissioner*

### Recommendations:

- Provide community leaders with clear criteria for the desired make up of community representatives (ensuring inclusivity and geographical coverage).
- IPs should provide feedback and follow up with communities they engage.
- Orient local stakeholders to ensure that the correct number of participants show up for the meetings.
- Procure water and sodas for the number of participants and the length of the meeting.



*“We have agricultural fields which lacks tools and seeds, we need fishing kits and financial support for start-up business. We are tired of Murle attacks especially on our cattle and children, this has sternly affected our lifestyle because it injects fear of insecurity for us to cultivate our agricultural fields.”  
– West Akobo Youth Association*