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

BUILDING COMMUNITY-LED RESILIENCE IN SOUTH SUDAN: LESSONS FROM POLICY LINK



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Policy LINK
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FOR BETTER POLICY SYSTEMS

How do we put communities at the center of resilience programming?

In South Sudan, Policy LINK worked to build community capacity to prioritize local needs, plan for a more resilient future, and inform government and donor programming.

To help communities develop and implement resilience-focused local action plans, Policy LINK designed a five-step participatory planning process (shown below). Through this process, we systematically engaged the four corners of the community—traditional authorities, civil society, the private sector, and local government—as well as historically marginalized groups such as women, persons with disabilities, and youth.

Policy LINK is a global Feed the Future project that works with and through local actors to strengthen policy systems to advance agriculture and food security priorities.

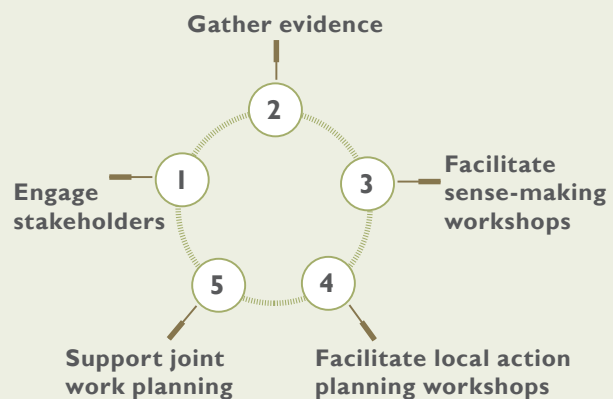
1. Engage stakeholders – Introduce the process to the community and build a foundation of trust for cooperation and coordination.

2. Gather evidence – Use resilience mapping to help communities understand the institutions, structures, processes, and capacities available for community-led resilience. Explore how communities and institutions organize themselves, recover from and mitigate the impacts of shocks, and protect development gains.

3. Facilitate sense-making workshops – Share the resilience mapping findings with communities at *payam*-level workshops and promote learning around the evidence. Guide workshop participants in identifying resilience priorities, needs, and actions and selecting delegates to represent them at subsequent planning workshops.

4. Facilitate local action planning workshops – Help community delegates translate resilience priorities into *payam* and county local action plans that instill a sense of agency in communities and facilitate improved collaboration with the government and USAID implementing partners.

5. Support joint work planning – Bring together community delegates, local government officials, and USAID implementing partners to develop joint work plans that facilitate mutual accountability and effective collaboration on resilience actions related to conflict mitigation, agricultural productivity, human and animal health, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) among other areas.



Policy LINK launched this planning process in communities around South Sudan. We gathered and shared evidence and engaged communities in translating the evidence into resilience priorities.¹

During this process, participants in Jur River and Wau Counties—the only counties that completed all five steps—reported feeling more responsible for solving their communities’ problems. They said they had engaged local leaders to resolve conflicts, started new businesses, and encouraged their friends and neighbors to adopt improved health and hygiene behaviors, among other things. One participant even invented a stove designed to reduce the risk of fire from home cooking—a recurring shock in her community.

¹ For all of the resulting reports and plans, as well as guides on the participatory planning process, please see Policy LINK’s South Sudan Resource Portal: <https://policylinkglobal.org/south-sudan-resource-portal>.

Policy LINK wanted to understand the link between these positive developments and its programming. In line with our collaborating, learning, and adapting approach, Policy LINK evaluated its participatory planning process to understand its intended and unintended outcomes, as well as lessons that could benefit development partners in South Sudan and other similar contexts.³

The evaluation showed the participatory planning process had improved communities' collective understanding of shocks and stressors. Communities were better prepared to overcome these shocks and stressors using community resources and to articulate their needs to others.

Moreover, as a result of engaging in the process, participants began to see themselves as agents of change, responsible for—and capable of—addressing shocks with community resources rather than waiting for donors or the government. This newfound sense of agency contributed to a host of unintended outcomes, from improved farming practices to increased uptake of health services. These outcomes resulted from communities tackling issues on their own and making more effective use of the assistance available through ongoing donor-funded projects.⁴

This brief highlights key aspects of the participatory planning process that produced these outcomes. It offers practical recommendations, applicable in a range of contexts, for putting communities at the center of resilience programming.

Use deliberate, iterative processes to instill a sense of agency and voice in development decision-making.

In South Sudan and other contexts where recurring shocks have left communities dependent on humanitarian aid for decades, instilling a sense of agency can be a lengthy, non-linear process.

Policy LINK carefully designed the local action planning process to help communities think of themselves as change agents rather than passive beneficiaries of humanitarian aid. This intention is evident in our overall process design, which built community capacity and confidence over time; our data collection and sharing process, which equipped communities with the information to undertake evidence-based, collaborative planning; our workshop content and exercises, which included deliberate efforts to instill a sense of agency and ownership; and our decision to start the planning process at the community level.



³ Policy LINK used an outcome-harvesting approach for the evaluation. This approach allows community members' voices to come through while maintaining evaluation rigor; the approach is also well suited to uncovering both intended and unintended outcomes.

⁴ For the full evaluation findings, please see the [South Sudan Outcome Harvest Final Evaluation Report](#).

Instilling a Sense of Agency: In Practice

- **Equip communities with the data and tools for evidence-based planning:** Policy LINK began by sharing the resilience mapping findings with communities. During these sense-making workshops, participants discussed and agreed on community problems, shocks, and stressors and brainstormed solutions. This approach helped instill a sense of agency in participants by equipping them with the information needed to undertake evidence-based resilience planning.
- **Encourage communities to articulate their vision for the future:** Policy LINK challenged workshop participants to articulate their vision for the community—and how they could make that vision a reality. This exercise helped instill a sense of agency by encouraging participants to connect their own actions to the achievement of their vision.
- **Design specific exercises to shift mindsets:** Policy LINK encouraged participants to interrogate their beliefs about self-reliance. In one exercise, participants were asked to agree or disagree with a series of “I” statements (e.g., “I am responsible for the development of my own community”; “I can remain resilient even without external support”; and “I can collaborate with other members of my community to build resilience”).
- **Start the planning process at the most local level feasible:** Policy LINK began the planning process at the *payam* level, where community members agreed on priority shocks and resilience actions. This input informed subsequent local action planning processes at the *payam* level, as well as local action and joint work planning at the county level. At each stage, workshop participants selected delegates to represent them at the next stage of planning. This approach gave communities control over who represented their interests at each stage of the planning process.

Participants in the planning process reported feeling a greater sense of agency, ownership, and accountability that translated to meaningful change in their behaviors.

This shift in mindset resulted in tangible outcomes. The connection between a greater sense of agency and increased farm production was particularly explicit. Workshop participants said their newfound sense of self-reliance had inspired them to engage in or scale up farming to be more food secure. One person said “... the change began when the community leaders participated or engaged in the training on community-led resilience facilitated by Policy LINK, South Sudan. People took the idea and applied it this year, in particular during May 2022 [the cultivation period], and they increased their farms’ land size to more *feddans* than usual.”

“Before, we depended on the NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] who came with ready plans to implement projects in our areas. Communities were passive. But now, we have discovered our roles and responsibilities in community development, as individuals and groups. Our role and responsibility is to help our community to become resilient. There are changes in the behaviors and attitudes of the communities.”

– Workshop participant



Level the playing field.

Reversing top-down development requires development partners to go beyond asking communities what they need. Simply asking the question does little to change the power dynamics at play.

Through the various planning workshops, Policy LINK helped create spaces where communities (through their delegates) could discuss their priorities, needs, and aspirations on an equal footing with development partners. This approach required a carefully designed and sequenced process that built community capacity and confidence over time, as well as socializing the approach among both communities and development partners.

Leveling the Playing Field: In Practice

- **Build community confidence and capacity through successive engagements:** Policy LINK designed the participatory planning process to use repeated engagements that built on one another. Through this process, community delegates became more confident and honed their planning skills over time. This approach helped level the playing field by equipping community delegates with the skills to confidently represent their communities' interests in joint work planning workshops.
- **Give communities space to articulate their own priorities:** Policy LINK invited implementing partners to participate in *payam* and county local action plan workshops as observers (they were active participants of the joint work planning workshops). This approach gave community delegates the freedom to articulate their aspirations and priorities. Similarly, communities developed their own plans, which they then presented to development partners and government officials. It also signaled the community-led nature of the planning process to development partners.
- **Reinforce locally-led processes through complementary activities:** Policy LINK, in its role providing backbone support for USAID/South Sudan's Partnership for Recovery and Resilience (PfRR), organized PfRR's Annual Learning Forums. Policy LINK took advantage of the opportunity to reinforce locally-led approaches to strengthening resilience. Specifically, Policy LINK created space for community delegates to share their priorities with donors. This approach reinforced locally-led approaches as well as enabled us to socialize the approach with donors that might not otherwise have participated in or been exposed to the participatory planning process.



Today, communities report communicating more openly with development partners and the government. Community delegates say they have shared their local action plans with development partners and local governments, noting what the community is doing to address its issues and where external support is needed. The evidence indicates that coordination between development partners and local government has also improved, with development partners more willing to share their plans and budgets with local authorities, for example. One government representative from Jur River said, “We feel empowered and valued when NGOs [nongovernmental organizations] involve us in the planning and implementation of their interventions because we can provide some inputs that will add value to their work due to our local knowledge and expertise.”

“In the workshops, I realized that local communities are at the center of their development—they only need external support to complement the capacity they are lacking.”

– *Workshop participant*

This improved coordination is already having an impact, most notably in the WASH sector in Jur River, where Policy LINK brought communities and USAID implementing partners together to discuss WASH priorities. USAID implementing partners said what they learned in the workshops informed the design of interventions aligned with community action and filled critical gaps. Communities, meanwhile, said they had improved their WASH practices. As a result, communities have reportedly seen fewer cases of cholera and other waterborne and diarrheal diseases.

Engage community delegates to champion action and scale up impacts.

Development activities—whether local planning processes, training sessions, or on-farm demonstrations—rarely reach all community members. But addressing communities’ most pressing challenges almost always requires broad-based support and widespread behavior change.

To amplify the impact of its activities, Policy LINK used a community delegate model. Communities selected delegates to represent them in the *payam* local action planning workshops; these delegates, in turn, selected delegates to participate in county-level workshops. This model created a sense of ownership and gave Policy LINK an avenue for sharing workshop messages with the broader community.

Scaling Up Impact through Community Delegates: In Practice

- **Ask communities to select their delegates:** Participants in the sense-making, *payam* local action planning, and county action planning workshops selected delegates to participate in the next phase of the process. This approach helped scale up impacts by ensuring the delegates were credible and influential in their communities.
- **Provide guidelines for the delegate selection process:** Policy LINK asked community members to select delegates who (a) came from diverse geographic locations, (b) represented diverse stakeholder groups (e.g., women, youth, the private sector, local government, etc.), (c) understood priority shocks and proposed actions, and (d) were willing to take an active role in mobilizing the community and local resources to implement the local action plan. This approach helped scale up impacts by encouraging communities to select delegates with the experience and networks to mobilize diverse community groups.
- **Encourage community delegates to share what they learned:** Policy LINK allocated time in the various workshops for delegates to reflect on their roles in improving the resilience of their communities and mobilizing resources. This decision helped scale up impacts by encouraging delegates to make a plan for sharing learnings with communities, mobilizing resources, and taking action.

The evaluation showed that community delegates played a key role in catalyzing behavior change and championing action in their communities. They disseminated key messages—through broadcasts on the radio station Voice of Hope in Wau county, for example—and mobilized their communities to take action on problems ranging from flooding to poor hygiene behaviors and conflicts between youth.

“In essence, these workshops have built my capacity to champion resilience actions and adopt a new way of active living and devoting efforts in my community.”

– *Workshop participant*

In Jur River, for example, delegates mobilized their communities to mitigate the impacts of floods, a priority shock for many areas. Delegates led awareness-raising campaigns, disseminating messages in churches, markets, community meetings, and traditional events. They also shared the local action plans—which entailed encouraging at-risk residents to move to higher ground, digging water channels around houses, and establishing an early warning system—with communities. When it came time to implement the action plans, community delegates tapped into the relationships with development partners and the government established during the workshop. Development partners, for example, provided tools for digging the water channels. The community took action, and their interventions protected homes, ultimately decreasing the number of people displaced compared to previous floods. As one workshop participant said, “The flood adaptation measures implemented by the communities in Jur River have also minimized the impact of floods on families. The flood used to submerge homes, displacing a high number of people every year; however, due to water channels the households dug around their homes, many people have managed to keep the flood water out of their compounds ...”

These outcomes indicate that communities in Jur River and Wau Counties are becoming more resilient. While many workshop participants credited Policy LINK for these outcomes, it is the workshop participants themselves who are responsible for changing their communities. Moving forward, we hope our experience not only fills key evidence gaps in how to build resilient societies but also serves as a model for others who wish to strengthen community resilience using a locally-led approach.



⁵ For more details on the evidence gaps in this area, please see “Building resilient societies in low- and middle-income countries: an evidence gap map” at <https://developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/building-resilient-societies-in-low-and-middle-income-countries-an-evidence-gap-map>



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