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Beneficiaries' perceptions of the contributions of community development projects to peacebuilding process in South Sudan: A case of Terekeka State

Aleu Garang Aleu*[1], Paul Bukuluki[2] and Christine Mpyangu Mbabazi[1]

[1]Department of Religion and Peace Studies, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University, Uganda.
[2]Department of Social work, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Makerere University, Uganda.

Despite the fact that a lot of research has been done about community development in relations to peacebuilding, there are a few studies available on the contribution of community development projects to peacebuilding process. The intention of this article is to start to fill the gap by investigating beneficiaries' perceptions of the contribution of the community development projects to peacebuilding process in Terekeka State. The study adopted qualitative approach. Two community development projects were selected for the study, that is, South Sudan Livelihood and Development Project (SSLDP) and Food Security and Livelihood Project (FSLP). The total of respondents for the case of SSLDP was 38 individuals for in-depth interviews (30 were project participants while 8 were non-participants). With regards to FSLP, respondents totaled 22 individuals for in-depth interviews (18 were project participants while 4 were non-project participants). In addition, 32 key informants were interviewed. Focus Group Discussions were carried out with 64 respondents in total, for both projects studied. The results of the finding were discussed after the process of data collection, with the help of key informants. The study revealed actors' positive perceptions of the contributions of community of development projects in sustainable peacebuilding which included nurturing friendly attitudes among the project participants, promoting unity and restoring positive communication, building confidence and trust, building sense of tolerance and love, overcoming fear and suspicions, enabling positive collaboration, creating bond between members, and enabling capacity building for peacebuilding engagement.

Key words: Peacebuilding, community development, Terekeka State.

INTRODUCTION

There have been numerous peacebuilding initiatives and agreements, today in the world, since the cold war period.

Some of the agreements and peacebuilding initiatives have successfully transformed conflicts into more

*Corresponding author. E-mail: ggaleu@chuss.mak.ac.ug.

constructive relations between individuals, communities and groups, while others have failed (Waller, 2007).

In South Sudan, Terekeka State, socially protracted conflicts had provided a serious challenge to peacebuilding efforts, in the early stages of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2005 that end a long civil between the north and south. The conflicts in this state had been associated with cattle aids, land issues and struggle for limited pastures and water. These had combined to cause wide spread socio-economic underdevelopment, resulting in outbreak and escalation of conflict between communities, loss of human lives, destruction of property and wide spread poverty. The government of South Sudan responded by supporting community development programs at all levels to reduce incidence of violence, through economic empowerment and capacity building. For instance, in 2012, the government of South Sudan allocated 5 US dollars million for the support of community development initiatives in all the states, with the ultimate aim of promoting peacebuilding drive through socio-economic transformation at the grassroots[1]. It is generally assumed that communities are better positioned in making decisions that affect their lives (UMMISS, 2014).

The study, therefore, explored whether community development projects contribute to peacebuilding process in South Sudan. There is a general assumption that community development methods emphasize growth and development from below, which consequently promotes peacebuilding drive, especially in developing countries Garb and Nan 2009). The study, therefore, provided an empirically based study on the contribution of community development projects to peacebuilding process at the grassroots in Terekeka State. More precisely, the research questions were: What are the beneficiaries' perceptions of the contribution of community development projects in peacebuilding process? What are the perceptions of non-project beneficiaries of the contribution of community development projects in the peacebuilding process?

This study was exploratory and it adopted qualitative approach. The data collection process was guided by the study's research questions. The methods used in data collection included Focus Group Discussions, key informant interviews, in-depth interviews with individuals and personal observations. In order to collect as much information as possible and deepen the understanding of the peacebuilding basically, the study adopted two community development projects for the study, that is, South Sudan Livelihood and Development Project (SSLDP) and Food Security and Livelihood Project (FSLP). The two community development projects represent the sectors of livelihood, which is cattle rearing, fishing and agriculture, in Terekeka State.

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[1]ZOA, South Sudan, Inc. (2012, April). *Semi-Annual Report, November 2011-May 31, 2012: Food Security and Livelihood Project.* Juba, South Sudan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Peacebuilding basically is primarily concerned with strengthening the role of local people and their institutions as a means of promoting peace (UNMISS, 2014). Lederach (1997) in his discourse on peacebuilding disagreed with the bottom up approach to peacebuilding arguing that it is always filled with hatred and suspicion from the authority. The argument was however echoed by de Coning (2013). While analyzing conflict in Northern Uganda. He asserted that peace can never be achieved by gun but through an inclusive peace that involves dialogue. Similarly, Chigas and Woodrow (2009) argued that the socio-cultural knowledge of the local initiatives improves peacebuilding process more than actors' holistic approach that requires meeting a variety of needs of ex-combatant. Therefore, this argument was further supported by Olson (1982), who asserted that peacebuilding requires the widest legitimacy and the process must not only be accepted by wider portion of the population, but must be based on the culture of the people at the grassroots. also supported this claim when he argued that in order to effectively deal with intra-state conflict, it requires a creative and complex approach, which can penetrate into the web of the relationships in which the conflicts are entangled, bring genuine reconciliation, and produce a better and wider set of interdependent relationship.

Peacebuilding initiative basically have also been credited on their ability to bring local people together to engage in constant reconciliation processes as participants learn to apologize and accept apologies, ask for forgiveness and to forgive, to heal and to close conflicts (Palmer, 2002). In this regard, people create space to dialogue, embrace micro-culture and inclusiveness in the process of peace building, and this becomes highly relevant for they open up all forms of group interaction in the process (Lederach et al, 2007). Another research carried out by the Centre of Ubuntu in Burundi, community groups in peace building ensure that they incorporate the work of other groups in the bottom up peace building process.

The potential for community development to contribute towards peace and peacebuilding lacks empirical evidences. In this regard, little research has been done with regards to the study on sustainable peacebuilding in relation to community development project. It follows that much of what is advocated on community development potential in peace/peacebuilding remains speculation.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study employed qualitative approach. The data were collected mainly through personal interviewing. The researcher used to regularly interact with respondents (Project beneficiaries) and key informants. Additionally, field notes for a certain relevant behavior or facts were also taken while carrying interviews. The researcher spent a total of six months in the field (three months in each

community development project studied). Qualitative methods of data collection were used and the interviews were conducted in local Arabic language, because it was spoken by the majority. The interviews were done through face to face interactions and extended dialogue on the topics related to Beneficiaries Perceptions of the Contribution of Community Development Projects in Peacebuilding Process. It is in this regard that qualitative in-depth interviews with open ended questions, both in Focus Group Discussions and individually, served as the main source of information. The major themes around which interviews were conducted were:

(1) Identification of respondents (age, sex, marital status, education level).
(2) Ways in which each community development project studied was perceived by its beneficiaries.
(3) Ways in which the community development project studied contributed to peacebuilding.
(4) Non-beneficiaries' perceptions of how the community development project studied contributed to peacebuilding process.

The process of interviewing was inspired by Hoyle et al. (2002). The researcher ensured the questions were asked in a proper way, which were comprehensible by the respondents and which motivated them to make the necessary effort in answering them. These interviews that were conducted in Arabic language were recorded, transcribed and later translated into English.

The methods of data collection that were used in the field included Focus Group Discussions, key informant interviews, in-depth interviews with individuals and personal observation. The main reason for the adoption of the given data collection methods was to explore what respondents feel, say and experience with regards to the contribution of community development projects. Focus Group Discussion in particular was used, in order to get rich information on consensus and minimize lies because it is hard to lie in a group; key informant interviews were adopted, in order to get expert views with regards to subject matter under study; and above all, the researcher was in the field for six months to observe events in relations to the study, as he carried out interviews, to observe traits that are not clearly communicated by the respondents.

Data analysis technique

The data for this study were analyzed qualitatively inform of text, which involved comparing, analyzing, weighing and combining empirical materials (Rubin, 2005), from interviews and field notes to deduce the meaning, so as to understand subject matter under study in a coherent explanation. There are many ways of analyzing qualitative data. The data analysis for this study began early during the data collection, where the results of early data analysis guided subsequent data collection process. The ideas developed at the start and during the data collection helped the researcher in framing the further questions that would be used to obtain data at the next stage. The major part of data analysis was done after the data collection, with the transcription of field notes and interviews during the data presentation and analysis.

In the presentation of the data, themes and concepts used by the respondents were cross examined from different interviews, and that helped shape the material to be wholly coherent, and offer a clear description of the subject under study and easily draw conclusion that relates to research questions. The objective of this qualitative analysis was not to provide numeric summaries but to portray shades of meaning through the words of respondents. In the analysis of the data, field notes, interview materials and researcher comments were classified into units and blocks of information that were analyzed together. Then later, the data units were categorized along the same theme in order to get a coherent

meaning. Therefore, the procedure in this regard, referred to the reading of field note and transcribed interviews, the identification of categories and emerging themes, and identification of these themes and categories linked together to present findings by use verbatim quotes from interview texts.

The study populations

This study involved two categories of respondents. The first category of respondents were community development project beneficiaries. The second category involved the individuals who are not participants of the community development project studied were referred to in this study as non- project beneficiaries. Non-project beneficiaries were added in order to deepen understanding and achieve much more validity of the data for that reason collected from participants. In this regard, both categories of participants were consulted. The total of respondents for the case of SSLDP was 38 individuals for in-depth interviews with individuals (30 were project beneficiaries while 08 were non project beneficiaries). With regard to FSLP, respondents totaled to 22 individuals for in-depth interviews (18 were project beneficiaries while 4 were non-project beneficiaries). In addition, 32 key informants were interviewed and Focus Group Discussion was carried out with 64 respondents. The results of the finding were discussed after the process of data collection, with the help of key informants.

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

Participants from both FSL and SSLD projects had positive perceptions and experiences of the contribution of their respective projects they participate in. This aspect was responded to by the participants themselves and some key informants, particularly the officials. The results from both study projects have been combined and are presented subsequently.

Nurturing friendly attitudes

Most of the respondents from both projects studied attested that their respective community development project has nurtured the atmosphere of friendships. This is one of the illustrative testimonies of respondent from FSLP:

"This project has instilled in us a friendly attitude towards one another; love for one another and trust that we have built for one another because we work together, we discuss together and market our products together. The project through its teachings and practice has dispelled hatred for one another".

Another respondent from SSLDP echoed the same points:

"SSLDP has made us good friend who believe in common goal and collective efforts. Imagine, when we missed each other for months, we hug and warmly welcome. This is how this project has far taken us. We become more and more united day by day with stronger relationship characterized by love".

The findings established that concept of friendship was commonly used by the beneficiaries of both projects. This term means people living together peacefully, and by rendering social support to one another. Research respondents from FSLP and SSLDP adopted the concept of love and brotherhood, as indicated in the aforementioned quote from a respondent. This means that, according to some participants from FSLP, when suspicion for one another, hatred and fear for one another reduces attitudes for love, friendship and social support increase. Thus, the findings indicate project participants (Beneficiaries) and non-project participants (Non-beneficiaries) in some aspects believe that both case study projects (SSLD and FSL) contributed positively to sustainable in their areas, because those two projects have enabled them to live and work mutually together.

As the findings indicate, respondents from SSLDP also emphasized their positive relational attitudes have been nurtured. Thus, project beneficiaries now support each other through non-discriminatory mutual help.

"This community development project has permanently inculcated the attitude of friendship, mutual support, care and tolerance in us. We are now friends and we always remain friends in every social space. When one of us gets in to trouble, we all intervene and help. This is how far this project has taken us! Female respondent from SSLDP".

This statement is similar to other statements, during the Focus Group Discussions for the participants of FSLP in Jemeza County, in which respondents accounted that they were one and they were friends who would hug each other whenever they met. According to the respondents of SSLD, it is that the culture of peace is nurtured.

"When we are concerned about each other's difficulties and problem, regardless of our differences in terms of ethnicity and religion that is a sign that we are at peace". A respondent from SSLD

An illustrative account in this regard could be the statement of a respondent from FSLP:

"When we go back home, we maintain our friendship and conviviality, and create other projects in which we work together; and even when one of us has a particular hard work, or any problem, which needs support, we intervene. This project! It reunited us".

This appears to reflect project participants' statements, during Focus Group Discussions for the participants of FSLP in Jemeza, we are one, we are friends, we love each other and we always grow together. In this regard, for example, a respondent in a group argued that when one gets involved in FSLP, he immediately realizes that people changed, as shown by participants' songs, jokes,

and mutual support. This also refers to what these three respondents from the same project, stated, respectively:

"In a few words, FSLP is a new family for all of us. All participants help and rescue each other. Whenever there are weddings, for instance, project participants are the first to offer their support".

"We, project participants, we are one. When for example we meet outside the work place, for example in the market, you better watch us hugging each other! Of course we hug other people too, but for project participants we hug each other differently! Because we are very close friends! Me, I actually compare that with students. You know how students hug each other when they meet, when they are in holidays! When they meet for example in the market, they form their own group. We also do the same".

"When you help each other and share food, it is a good thing to me! It means that for example we, who are in this project, you can see that we are completely different from non-participants because the non-project participants are still uncertain of their future, but we have been able to be with them, we talk to each other, we live convivially, and we do not have any worry".

However, the views of non-project participants are now juxtaposed against the aforementioned contentions of the members of SSLDP. They maintained that project enabled people to come into contact to communicate and have dialogue with each other and to visit each other and live convivially.
Another respondent said:

"Yes, the project has changed something because it brings together people of all ethnic background without any discrimination. May be it is because of frequent contact that people changed; because they visit each other and converse".

Another respondent who was a non-project participant said:

"Everybody thought it was impossible, but we watch them; they are happy together in that project (referring to SSLDP). This is true".

This was also echoed by another non-project participant from Jemeza county, who stated:

"I think their community development project help them discuss everything because one of them with whom we are in neighborhood told me that they discuss all the problems related to experiences of conflicts. Actually the fact that it brought together people of different communities is enough. None could talk to the other before. I also watch them, they are friends. For example,

during convivial festivals, they invite us also; we go and drink and eat together, and we all dance together".

Considering the above contentions of participants of both selected community development projects, and nonmembers, it appears that these respondents seem to only show a solely positive picture of the impact of those projects studied on peacebuilding.

Promoting unity and restoring positive communication

As the data already indicate, most respondents said community development projects have impacted positively on them by promoting unity and restoring positive communication. Here is an illustrative account of the participants from SSLDP:

"I thought coming together was not possible as people who did not trust each other because we belong to a different rival community. I can say there is no division in this project. Rather it has reunited us".

Another respondent in a Focus Group Discussions of the participants FSLP from Jemeza County also said:

"To be honest really, as a beneficiary of FSLP, I would like to admit the fact that this project has enabled free interactions and regular contact with each other, regardless of our ethnic differences. We sing, laugh and eat together. This is how far this project has united us".

In connection with the earlier statement, data generally reveal that their respective community development project effectively enabled positive interactions and communication among them in a way that some members often referred to as fruitful conversations. Not only were their divisions broken, but also positive communication among them became nurtured as they strived together to increase agricultural productions and look for common market for their products. Likewise, the aforementioned statement, an account of another respondent from SSLDP emphasizes the common objective, notably among participants from different communities, which constituted an occasion for constructive conversations and equality among them, and consequently unity: He states:

"For example, I often watch. Since this project was established, we all joined together; you can see that they all share the same objective, or job. We, members, have no problem, because when a member gets into contact with one the other. We are no longer divided; this project has reunited us, we are one! Another important thing is that we are no longer starving. No poverty".

These testimonies emphasize the impact of community

development projects in fostering positive communication among conflicting parties. Other illustrative accounts are the statements of from Focus Group Discussions in Terekeka County. They held, respectively:

"This community development project enables good conversations. I mean conversations which soothe one's mind. We always cherish the principle of equality. We called it livelihood project because it is really improving our lives; it helped us to talk to each other again, a thing which was like a dream. Our conversations are always soothing and we always understand each other's problem.

"This community development project makes me happy; I converse with people; I can't have any problem. We, all, sit together and while conversing. Can you imagine, I am young but this community development project considers all of us as equal! Actually, I don't have words in which to express that".

From the aforementioned statement, a picture of how the selected study community development projects enabled, and still enable, grassroots members to get united and consequently overcome discrimination, while fostering positive communication, can be easily seen.

Building confidence and trust

As data indicate, negative relational problems of fear and suspicion, which characterized the relationships between conflicting social groups, have been overcome as a result of their participation in the community development projects studied. As found, non-project participants interviewed were still fearful and suspected their enemy'. Below are some illustrative experiences and perceptions. By beginning with Mundari respondent from FSLP, which reads:

"There are members here from Dinka Aliap whom we suspected to have raided our cattle some time back…we no longer look at them as our enemies but as our brothers. This project has helped overcome fear and suspicion and built trust for each other. This of course is peacebuilding".

Another respondent went on to say:

"…I even invited my friends from the project whom we considered before as our enemies. We now look at each other as brothers and sisters and not enemies".

A respondent interviewed from SSLDP reported that she no longer hates and fear people that she perceived were her enemies. The teachings within her project have transformed her life. She said she was oriented more on money making through agriculture.
    Another respondent from Terekeka also viewed things

from a similar perspective. For example, a respondent who once involved in robbery in which a person was killed was detained in prison for 8 years and later released, held:

"For example, I was sentence to 8 years in prison for involving in an act robbery-cattle raid. After my release from prison I joined this community development project which has helped me to overcome suspicion and fear because of the conversation and contact in the project. This according to me is a step toward peacebuilding".

With regard to suspicion, a respondent in Focus Group Discussion in Terekeka County describes, how SSLDP also enabled them to overcome suspicion:

"No suspicion in this project. We are open to one another, and that has helped in strengthening our unity. Yes, because of the good spirit in this project; we love and support each other".

These considerations emphasize that the project enabled grassroots members in Terekeka to overcome fear and suspicion and build confidence and trust in each other. The projects have helped them reduce fear and hatred and increase unity and confidence, hence, sustainable peacebuilding.

Nurturing sense of tolerance and love

As the data indicate, the community development projects studied contributed to peacebuilding by enabling the participants to embrace the spirit of togetherness by working together and communicating positively, hence overcoming feeling of hatred and anger.
This is illustrated in the statement of a respondent from SSLDP:

"Well, I cannot say we are completely free from feelings of fear, hatred and anger, but I can say negative attitude have been reduced. That is a positive sign that we are heading towards a peaceful transformation".

Another respondent from FSLP said:

"Really I am thankful for what this project did, because it managed to bring people together. With the teaching of the project everything is fine".

The statement confirms that anger and hatred between individual members of the community reduced because of positive communication and teachings while working together cooperatively in the project.

Apart from enabling conflicting parties to overcome negative and hostile attitudes, positive relationships were also nurtured by their respective community development project, in addition to the positive communication, as

discussed earlier. The common concept used in this regard, is *conviviality* among project participants. In addition to fear, suspicion, and distrust, respondents' accounts also emphasized anger and hatred as other relational problems between conflicting parties prior to their membership of a community development project. Illustrative testimonies concern the respective accounts, below, of the three respondents in a Focus Group Discussions of the participants of SSLDP:

"Truly, this community development has changed our lives. We hated each other just because we could not trust each other. I thought everyone from Dinka was bad. But now, it is a story. The anger and hatred has disappeared, and it is because of this project".

"After all our cattle were raided by our neighbors Dinkas, I hated everyone from there because I thought they were people who did not have heart for humanity".

"That is true, the Mundari hated us but we also hated them. They were considering all of us, I mean *Dinka*, as aggressors while it was not the case. Not every *Dinka* kill, you know that, no!"

These statements exemplify community development participants accounts were angry towards each other, and hated, other members from other perceived enemy community. Likewise, non-participants, not only emphasized fear, suspicion and mistrust, but they also underscored anger and hatred, as the relational problems between conflicting parties, prior to their respective community development project. An illustrative testimony is the account of a respondent from FSLP who stated:

"Their thoughts were preoccupied by negative thinking; they thought everyone from other side was bad, which was not true; after joining the community development project. They are together now".

All the aforementioned accounts show that the relationships between conflicting parties prior to their membership of their respective community development projects were negative. These relationships were characterized by division and the absence of communication, and by fear, suspicion, and mistrust, as well as anger and hatred. Yet, some of the people (conflicting parties) whose relationships were negative are now members of the community development project. It is therefore paramount to know whether their participation in community development project was motivated by a desire to restore these negative relationships before considering the project's impact in this regard.

Enabling collaborative engagement for peacebuilding

The key concept that participants from both selected

community development projects repeatedly underscored and insisted on is that their respective community development project is a collaborative network between them, where people who were divided by various social conflicts come into contact with each other and that contact between conflicting parties allows things to get to light. Illustrative experiences and perceptions depicting community development projects as an encounter are worth putting forward. In this regard, a statement of a respondent from SSLDP, reads:

"Actually, our community development project is our collaborative network;[2] it is a thing that enabled people who were divided to get into contact. This really provides us the opportunity to get into contact with one another all the time".

The same assertion was echoed by a respondent from FSLP, who attested that his community development project provided him with a platform for contact, interaction and constructive engagement with people that he was previously afraid of. In this regard, it follows that community development projects are perceived by its participants (conflicting parties) as collaborative network. This also follows the assertion of another respondent that:

"Community development project is a collaborative network; this project brought together divided people, without intrigues or discrimination among them".

As the statement of a key informant from FSLP emphasized, the concept to which all respondents repeatedly pointed out was that a community development project was a collaborative network, as it brought together people (that is, conflicting parties) who were divided in various social conflicts, and thus made possible the communication between their contact and communication thus became the key factors behind the positive relationship developed by the beneficiaries themselves.

DISCUSSION

The study aimed to explore whether community development projects contribute to peacebuilding process in South Sudan. The study revealed that communities in Terekeka State now live together in a culture of peace, where the communities experience a sense of security and freedom of movement; culture of collaborative engagement was nurtured; fear and suspicion for one another faded; the communities have experienced economic growth and improved markets, with interethnic cooperation and integration; there is a shared sense of

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[2]By *collaborative network,* respondents refer to a space/place, where people meet/come into contact.

responsibility for sustaining the peace; and the peace dialogue meetings continue the inclusion and empowerment of women and youth as peacebuilders. In addition, community members have been empowered as peace leaders and travel to adjacent counties to work towards peace in neighboring villages through their community development projects.

Most scholarships confirm those contributions of the community development project in peacebuilding in conjunction with Anderson and Olsen (2003), Anderson et al. (2008), Chigas and Woodrow (2009), and Lederach (2005). The data show that the community development projects studied contributed to peacebuilding by transforming individuals and socio-economic realms at the grassroots. The study further indicates that poverty was the general problem and the joint strive to solve it successfully through community development projects became an opportunity for them to interact, meet and constructively work together. That enabled them to overcome divisions, fear and hatred and nurture spirit of love, tolerance, unity and cooperative.

Despite the fact that the perceptions are solely positive about the contribution of the community development project studied, shortcomings have been discovered. For instance, the case of SSLDP, there were problems of bad leadership reported by the participants, whereby project participants accused their current leaders of mismanaging the project relating to misuse of funds and making decisions unilaterally without the consent of other members. While the external shortcoming was reported to be the interference of local authorities in the affairs of the project. These internal and external obstacles experienced in SSLDP were not, however, experienced in FSLP. The obstacles, in this regard, point to the lack of market for the agricultural products.

Finally, the scholarship has indicated through community development projects, peacebuilding results are facilitated by a process that was elective, participatory, and inclusive (Garb and Nan, 2009; Lederach, 1997). This exactly is what this study has confirmed.

Conclusion

The restoration of relationships between communities at the grassroots in Terekeka State, South Sudan is one of the key tasks of post conflict peacebuilding following long civil war between north and south that ended in 2005, with the historic signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Whether a community development project contributes positively in this regard constituted the study's research problem. At the completion of this study, the general conclusion is that community development projects contributed positively to peacebuilding by mending relationships that were broken by various social conflicts. Each community development project studied provided a space for transforming negative and

dehumanizing attitudes into positive ones: from fear to fearlessness, from suspicion to trust, from division to union, from anger and resentment to calm, from hatred to attraction and conviviality. Peacebuilding requires that people who have been traumatized by the past events should have the space to be free from that burden. To improve the relationship, people thus must be in a place where they are able to think positively in a given space and have the opportunity to think not only about their physical survival but also where they can begin to imagine life without hatred, conflict and suspicion. This confirms Waller's insistence on the power of the situation in influencing people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours (2007). However, the study found that the role of a community development project in peacebuilding process is conditional; it has to be geared towards achieving the goal to which it was created for.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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