

Situating 'The Local' In Peacebuilding In South Sudan

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Violence in South Sudan continues, confirming the fragility of the peace forged by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that led to the referendum, secession, and independence of South Sudan in 2011. The failed implementation of the peace agreements meant to arrest and mend the deterioration of the civil war that erupted in December 2013 has left South Sudan vulnerable to continual relapse into conflict. The conflict resolution processes that have taken place so far have largely been characterized by top-down approaches, whereby most decision-making is centralized within political elites and international actors with the hopes that their peace plans will trickle down to the general population. The peace processes have commonly occurred through high-level discussions with the belligerent parties—the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in Government (SPLM/A) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-in opposition (SPLM/A-IO). These processes have often been initiated, conducted, and enforced by international players, including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and IGAD-Plus.¹ Overall, there has been limited meaningful participation of local actors—such as community groups, faith-based organizations, women and youth groups, and grassroots and non-governmental institutions—in the mainstream peace initiatives.²

This high-level approach has proven to not only be exclusionary, but also prescriptive and insufficient in dealing with the current multidimensional character of the ever-changing conflict. The formation and implementation of the peace agreement has fallen short of curbing the conflict. This is because the conflict has different

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dynamics, including political disagreements, localized conflicts, explosive community divisions around ethnic cleavages, a multiplicity of armed groups, revenge crimes and killings, competition for resources, and opportunistic killings.

The deteriorating conditions in South Sudan increase the importance of finding innovative peacebuilding strategies that will not only facilitate dialogue, but promote inclusivity, ownership, and a transference of agency to communities. This inclusive, bottom-up approach will uphold the legitimacy and sustainability of peace initiatives by promoting the buy-in of communities to various peace initiatives.

This paper examines the position of local peacebuilding actors (i.e., 'the local') and how their positionality has affected peace efforts in South Sudan. It critiques current approaches and identifies shortcomings and lessons learned from current top-down approaches, emphasizing their exclusionary approach. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of a bottom-up approach that accounts for local peacebuilding actors and efforts. Lastly, the paper shows that despite improvement in recent efforts to acknowledge the local, lingering misconceptions and imbalanced partnerships between local and international actors still make it difficult to manage bottom-up processes, so top-down approaches to peacebuilding persist. The paper recommends a framework that involves local stakeholders as critical partners in mainstream peace initiatives.

Overview of Conflict and Peace in South Sudan

The December 2013 civil war that engulfed South Sudan started as a political rivalry between the President, Mr. Salva Kiir, and the former Vice President, Mr. Riek Machar. It has been argued that the war is a power struggle between Machar and Kiir that developed from contention between the ethnic Dinka and Nuer over political and economic power. Although South Sudan was conflict-prone prior to the start of the civil war, the scale of devastation caused by the current conflict was shocking.³ The civil war has assumed a volatile mix of inter- and intra-ethnic, communal, and boundary disputes, and resource tensions and competition infused with political manipulation at a national level.⁴ Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed and almost 2 million people internally displaced. The war has resulted in a refugee crisis that is straining the region and a humanitarian crisis exacerbated by natural disasters, famine, and food insecurity.⁵

Violence is increasingly becoming normalized, often leaving citizens vulnerable with no recourse to the judicial system.⁶ Furthermore, most of the conflicts are localized, leading to pockets of violence and opportunistic killings with elements of conflict that fuel the civil war and are rarely the focus of high-level negotiations.⁷ Communal conflicts over resources and land expand beyond a binary competition for power and demonstrate the multi-layered nature of the conflict.⁸

Yet, the South Sudanese political leadership remains highly uncommitted to the peace process. Their lack of commitment is evident, for instance, in their reluctance to implement the IGAD-Plus led Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS), which called for a ceasefire and a transitional government and was signed by the SMPL/A and SPLM/A-IO.⁹

Failures of Current Top-down Approaches to Peacebuilding

The peacebuilding mechanisms employed in South Sudan between 2011 and 2013 focused on state and institution-building, with minimal local involvement and institutionalization.¹⁰ In 2011, the Peacebuilding Fund for the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was framed with a mandate that primarily focused on building state capacity to manage conflict and strengthen the rule of law under the principle of national

ownership. This led to the employment of a \$14 million Peacebuilding Support Plan.¹¹

Such strategies hinge on the notion of “liberal peace,” that promotes peace through democratization, the rule of law, human rights, and a free, globalized market. This is done through institutional building/strengthening at a high political level and is often detached from local institutions.¹² Given South Sudan’s protracted and violent conflict, such a high-level peace is neither accessible nor relatable to its people. Perhaps not surprising, the UNMISS Peacebuilding Plan projects were suspended soon after beginning due to the outbreak of the civil war.

The inadequacies of the approach expose the gap between the political elites (or the decision-makers) and the citizens, who are often thought of as recipients of, rather than participants in, peace. The inadequacies were once again realized when the July 2016 conflict in Juba left 300 dead and 35,000 people displaced.¹³ This violence not only shows that the IGAD-Plus ARCSS has failed, but also that the focus of the UNMISS peacebuilding approach did not provide the protection, resilience, and peace education needed for the citizens.¹⁴ Following this realization, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 2252 changing the UNMISS mandate from support of the Government of South Sudan in peace consolidation, state-building, and economic development, to the protection of civilians.¹⁵ The UNSC also urged open and inclusive national dialogue, involving the participation of youth, women, faith groups, and civil society organizations, among others.¹⁶ While high-level interactions have had some success in peacebuilding, nationally negotiated conflicts have shown the persistence of instability if there is an absence of buy-in and accountability at the local level.¹⁷ In South Sudan current approaches appear to favor state institutions and elites at the expense of local actors and processes.

Exclusion of the Local in Peacebuilding Efforts

Mainstream peacebuilding, often framed as actions taken after the silencing of the guns, situates the local as an afterthought. As a result, the local is under-prioritized and under-resourced.¹⁸ For instance, UN funding is directed more towards foreign organizations which in turn decide on the dissemination of the funds to the local organizations, and the ARCSS agreements mostly involved the belligerent parties.¹⁹ The National Dialogue processes launched by President Kiir in 2017, however, are a positive sign. The Dialogue is intended to be an inclusive, integrative process of nationwide consultation between local and regional communities in order to end violence, develop national unity, and promote reconciliation.²⁰ These processes have provided the opportunity for South Sudanese to address the complex web of conflicts using a top-down-bottom-up process that links the national, regional, and the grassroots levels of the interconnected conflicts.

Some international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have adapted their approaches to build on, facilitate, and support the work of local actors and processes. Organizations such as the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), among others, work to ensure South Sudan’s transformation into a stable country by supporting the increased participation and inclusion of local youth and women groups from various provinces into its decision making and conflict resolution processes, especially in the implementation of the ARCSS.²¹

However, it appears that many INGOs and state actors continue to exclude local actors. Often this is because international actors do not understand local organizations and do not possess a non-western context regarding their role and efforts. To the extent that grassroots organizations are involved, their interactions are often still defined by a paternalistic attitude of international organizations attempts to transfer norms. This is seen in the need for the “exportation of western knowledge” to the ideas and methodologies used

by local peacebuilders.²² Western NGOs such as Oxfam and World Vision have faced criticism of “copy and pasting” projects in South Sudan and diverting peacebuilding resources from local organizations.²³ In some cases, local peace actors are treated as sub-contractors who can help mostly in the implementation of externally conceived and funded projects. Such a strategy is unsustainable and usually leads to the disconnection of peace initiatives to the recipients of peace. This approach continues to weaken the sense of local responsibility and solutions and lead to a practice of peacebuilding as an exercise of intervention expected from external sources toward the post-conflict communities, which are often seen as the passive recipients of external assistance.²⁴

The Importance of Involving the Local in Peacebuilding in South Sudan

The expanding conflict in South Sudan exemplifies the need for an approach that is vertically inclusive of the local. Although the impetus for ending the conflict in South Sudan primarily stems from political elites, belligerent party members, and international state representatives, comparative research has shown the central position that local organizations can play in the peace process.²⁵ The recent failure of the Government of South Sudan to commit to peace has led to community groups mobilizing to pursue peace. South Sudanese communities are increasingly looking beyond the government for mechanisms to resolve the conflict. In their efforts, local level groups such as the Eve Organization for Women,²⁶ the African Youth Action Network,²⁷ and the Church Leaders’ Mediation Initiative²⁸ have employed both contemporary and traditional strategies to peacebuilding, and continue to play a role that has not been fully supported or recognized.

There are strategies championed by non-traditional peacemakers that have proven to have an impact on communal disputes through community-led programs that reflect the cultural significance of the groups involved. These peace programs have created an avenue for communities to express their grievances. Examples of community peacebuilding projects can be found in the western corridor in South Sudan’s Bahr El Gazal region, where community leaders organize conferences to solve disputes between Sudanese Missiriya (cattle herding pastoralists) and the South Sudanese Dinka farmers.²⁹ The local community and religious groups have acted as negotiators and advisors by holding conferences where they coordinate peaceful grazing land and access to water and pasture.³⁰

Local organizations contribute significantly to peacebuilding in South Sudan through greater understanding of the culture and language, increased sensitivity to political and social dynamics, the ability to take quick actions, and the ability to strengthen accountability in communities. Community-level peacebuilding efforts should be supported in order to resolve the localized conflicts that significantly contribute to the ongoing war.

The contribution of local organizations can be seen in their efforts of promoting direct communication and contact between communities. The Grassroots Relief and Development Agency (GREDA) uses a community dialogue strategy for women, youth, and community leaders who they believe can influence the communities positively. For example, they work with the community to eliminate hate speech, support community education, provide basic health services, and develop and business opportunities.³¹ This strategy and level of engagement has proved useful in identifying key areas of focus for communal disputes, and in strengthening interactions between conflicting groups.^{32,33}

Local organizations also directly engage with the community workforce for peace projects. The Integrated Development Organization (IDO) organizes a water management committee that is responsible for tackling the day-to-day issues and potential conflicts that arise around established water resources. IDO trains community leaders to manage disputes and build their skills on conflict mitigation.³⁴ The South Sudanese Network for Democracy and Elections (SSuNDE)³⁵ and Community Empowerment for Progress Organization (CEPO)³⁶ have both engaged in community strengthening projects. SSuNDE has done this through highlighting inclusivity in election monitoring, while CEPO is engaged in training state institutions at the county level on the Local Government Act 2009.³⁷ This training specifically focuses on strengthening social cohesion of the leadership and the community through transparency and accountability.

The importance of local peace actors cannot remain undervalued and unsupported at the risk of weakening local structures and minimizing their contributions. In the same way that international organizations work on reconstituting and strengthening governmental institutions, they need to employ the same effort to localized structures. South Sudan needs to not only depend on the “orthodoxies and statist, territorial logic of mainstream liberal peacebuilding,” but to “locate the possibility of peace in the agency of the local.”³⁸

Recent Efforts to Include the Local in Peacebuilding

The international community has started to shift its view toward inclusivity in peace initiatives. There has been significant policy developments from practitioners in the larger peacebuilding architecture. An example of this inclusionary approach can be seen in the 2016 UNSC Resolution 2282, which was adopted unanimously and calls for a reformation of the peacebuilding architecture to promote more inclusivity of local peace processes, and was in turn supported by a resolution by the United Nations General Assembly. The G7+³⁹ have also developed a “New Deal” that highlights the necessity of a “legitimate and inclusive politic” when it comes to peacebuilding.⁴⁰ These developments signify some of the most significant attempts at increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of peacebuilding strategies.⁴¹

The shift in international focus has also pushed both state and non-state peace actors to increase their focus on the local. The U.S.-based NGO, Search for Common Ground, has developed a 20-episode radio drama called “Sergeant Esther” that broadcasts nation-wide in support of local media houses. It promotes peace and speaks against hate speech by telling a story of an officer who resolves conflicts with dialogue and nonviolence. This series is a collaboration between Search for Common Ground South Sudan, Common Ground Productions, local screenwriters, the Catholic Radio Network, the South Sudan Theater Organization, and Radio Bakhita.⁴² Peace Direct works in Unity State in South Sudan to train community leaders in conflict analysis and conflict mapping in order to manage appropriate responses.⁴³

Conclusion

Despite the potential for meaningful local efforts in contributing to peacebuilding, the gap between the top-down and bottom-up approaches remains large and worrisome. The persisting gap is exacerbated by the challenges facing local organizations and the difficulty of operating during the current war. Issues of funding, coordination, lack of skills, and security render local organizations largely dependent on external actors.⁴⁴ The challenge moving forward for both local, national, and international peacebuilders in South Sudan is to narrow the gap between their efforts in order to more effectively and sustainably solve the crisis. To do so, high-level actors must understand the position that the local occupies and include them in their mainstream strategies and programs.

For a set of policy options and recommendations related to narrowing the gap between local and international peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan, see the accompanying Africa Program Policy Brief No. 14 by Emmaculate Asige Liaga.

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