

The role of track two initiatives in Sudanese peace processes

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The contribution of non-governmental diplomacy to the success or otherwise of Sudan's peace processes over the past decades is difficult to determine. Being by nature unofficial and discreet, such 'track two' processes are often not well documented. This is certainly true in Sudan, but other factors also contribute to the difficulty of assessment in the Sudanese context. The complexities of the civil wars since independence have been made more acute by the powerful role of the military in Sudanese government and in the governance of opposition-held areas. Military negotiators, focusing on military issues such as territory, force levels and ceasefires, do not necessarily see a need for informal outside assistance or support. Moreover, power has been in the hands of a relatively small number of individuals and the war has often been fought through the use as proxies of militias that have frequently changed allegiance. The atmosphere of uncertainty and mistrust that this has engendered has encouraged secrecy in formal negotiations. Moreover, the few existing records of informal initiatives have not always been prepared with objectivity.

Defining track two

To assess track two diplomacy's role and achievements, we must make some attempt to define it and distinguish it from the range of civil society and human rights activities associated with the conflicts. Track two can broadly be understood to mean unofficial, non-governmental interventions to prevent or resolve violent conflict. Such efforts can attempt to mediate conflict directly in the absence of official mediation, prepare the way for such official efforts or work alongside formal talks to improve the climate and contribute to a successful outcome to negotiations. The focus is on unofficial work in support of official diplomatic negotiations that address civil war, as distinct from other activities that may contribute to a peaceful society such as the people-to-people peacebuilding processes described elsewhere in this volume. Our notion of track two includes what some



refer to as ‘track one-and-a-half’ initiatives, which might be more linked to official processes than other initiatives in the track two spectrum, but generally involve many of the same people. Drawing the line around what constitutes ‘the second track’ is inevitably a subjective judgment.

Perhaps ironically, both the contribution and the limitations of track two derive from its position of weakness. At best, a track two intervener has the independence and lack of agenda that will allow it to establish trust with governments and armed opposition groups alike. Being itself a non-state actor, it can encourage parity at the table between the armed groups and the powerful state they oppose. It can also develop a more inclusive approach to the conflict, involving more representatives of the wider society and encouraging a more thorough treatment of underlying conflict factors than might be allowed by the formal negotiators’ focus on reaching ‘a deal.’ Tackling the underlying factors is likely to lead to a more sustainable peace agreement. On the other hand, it has neither the power to impose an agreement and guarantee its implementation nor, in most cases, the resources to contribute a peace dividend on a sufficient scale. One key to the effectiveness of track two is the degree of cooperation with formal mediators and negotiators, who may not always welcome the assistance. It will be seen below that this factor is one of the main gaps in the Sudanese processes.

The development of track two in Sudan

Probably the earliest significant non-official international intervention in the north-south civil war was that of the Carter Center, founded by former US President Jimmy Carter. The Center has been involved in health and agricultural development work in Sudan since 1986 and has consequently built up contacts and relationships. Partly to make the health interventions possible, President Carter became involved in mediation between the Sudanese government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in Kenya in November-December 1989. The intervention failed to secure an agreement, occurring as it did at a time of turbulence in the military balance between the government and SPLM/A, fluidity in negotiation fora and political turbulence in Khartoum following the Islamist coup.

However, President Carter’s involvement continued during the 1990s as attempts by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to mediate in the Sudanese civil war emerged. This enabled him to broker the six-month ‘Guinea worm ceasefire’ in 1995 – then the longest ceasefire in the history of the conflict – allowing health work by the Carter Center and others to go ahead in Sudan. However, it is unclear whether this specialized mediation for humanitarian purposes had a positive or negative effect on the official negotiations. It was criticized by some at the time for allowing Khartoum to use its unofficial contacts with the Carter Centre to avoid serious

engagement with the official regional mediation, illustrating the risk of unintended consequences and the sensitivity of high-level track two involvement.

The Carter Center continued its occasional contact with actors in the region. President Carter secured agreement in 1999 between the governments of Uganda and Sudan that they would not support each other's rebels, and in 2002 he met Sudanese President Omer al-Bashir and SPLM/A Chairman John Garang. This kind of high-level mediation by a person of international prestige can raise expectations which are difficult to fulfil, but can also increase an intervener's capacity for influence.

A very different style of track two diplomacy has been practised by Concordis International. Under its former name of Relationships Foundation International, this small UK-based NGO started a Sudan programme in 1999 in partnership with the South African-based African Renaissance Institute. The aim was not directly to broker agreements or publicly to undertake advocacy, but rather to use low-profile inclusive consultations both to build relationships between key players and to provide a space for them to develop constructive solutions to long-term conflict causes. The existence of this model of long-term engagement in South Africa and Rwanda between 1986 and 1999 had become known to a number of Sudanese individuals, who asked the organization to instigate a similar process in Sudan. Over the years, an inclusive group of Sudanese – including senior members of political parties, government ministers, religious leaders, members of official negotiating teams, militia leaders and prominent academics – has been built up who feel ownership of the process and are confident in meeting in their personal capacities to talk together in depth on conflict issues in a non-threatening environment.

The dialogue has also brought those at the negotiating table into informal contact with the broader society and each other. One senior track one negotiator's comment on the process was, "When you have lived with your political opponent for several days and eaten meals with him, it is difficult when you sit across the negotiating table to treat him as the devil incarnate." A total of thirteen consultations have to date been facilitated at an all-Sudan level, typically covering one or two themes requested by the participants, including such disparate subjects as water resources, education, land and religion. Concrete outcomes from this kind of activity, which has the dual aims of seeking constructive consensus on peaceful options and building relationships, are difficult to define (and it is, by extension, difficult to fund).

The relationship between track two initiatives and the IGAD negotiations was not close. Although personal

relationships were a factor, the main reason was probably the determination of both the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the SPLM/A to exclude others from the negotiations. As the SPLM/A was in touch with other opposition parties through the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), it was probably the government that was most resistant to a more inclusive approach. There was no shortage of constituencies within Sudan and in the diaspora with aspirations to have their voice heard. This was possible in an informal way through the work by Concordis and its predecessors and through public advocacy by civil society groups, supported by organizations like Justice Africa. After a protocol had been agreed, efforts were made to disseminate its content, but the door was closed to any more formal involvement of the wider society in the negotiations. The style of bargaining in the negotiations did not lend itself to a multilateral approach, so it is admittedly difficult to see how a broader approach might have worked, but such bilateral negotiations potentially pay for their exclusiveness in a settlement that does not have wide endorsement on the ground.

Experience in Darfur and the east

Several unofficial or semi-official attempts, alongside the official mediation, were made to reinvigorate the faltering Darfur peace talks in 2004 and 2005.

The Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (CHD) is based in Geneva and enjoys a close relationship with the UN. It developed contacts with the armed opposition groups in an attempt at direct mediation to broker a ceasefire to secure humanitarian access for relief organizations. Talks scheduled for February 2004 failed to materialize amidst somewhat acrimonious press releases making claims and counter-claims about whether the GoS had agreed to attend or had even been invited. Once positions have been staked out publicly, it is difficult for either side to show weakness by backing down. Moreover, a track two organization is always in danger of being perceived or accused of being in the pocket of the other side and public knowledge of contact with one side can strengthen this suspicion. At the time, a confusing situation prevailed as many international agencies sought ways of bringing the GoS, the Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) together, after the fragile ceasefire mediated by the Chadian government in September 2003 broke down in December.

However, in April 2004 the CHD was closely involved in assisting the Government of Chad with its mediation of the first formal talks in N'Djamena, which culminated in a ceasefire agreement, and in the ensuing discussions on technical arrangements. It also subsequently facilitated various meetings for relief NGOs and donor

representatives with the opposition groups and the GoS in Geneva and provided technical assistance to the early rounds of negotiations mediated by the African Union (AU) in Abuja.

In May 2005, the Roman Catholic peace community of Sant'Egidio, which has had extensive involvement in peace talks in Africa (especially Mozambique), brought representatives of the SLM/A and JEM together after the Abuja talks appeared to be stalled while the parties waited to assess the effectiveness of the SPLM/A's participation in the new Government of National Unity. At a meeting in Rome, the movements met representatives of the AU and agreed to "resume as soon as possible the Abuja negotiations under the auspices of the African Union without preconditions."

Various international experts were involved in providing support to the AU at Abuja, whether as individual consultants or as representatives of NGOs like Justice Africa or Concordis International. As the talks dragged on, the dividing lines between track one and track two became more blurred than had been the case in the IGAD-mediated talks between the GoS and the SPLM/A. IGAD, under Lazaro Sumbeiywo, was perhaps in a better position to build a permanent secretariat than the AU, which had to seek assistance for a sporadic process on a more *ad hoc* basis. In addition, IGAD was working with more unified and disciplined negotiating teams.

Meanwhile, Concordis facilitated three research-based track two consultations for Darfurians between September 2004 and August 2005 covering some of the longer-term issues such as land use and tenure, and made the agreed conclusions available to the parties and mediators at Abuja. Arguably, such inputs could have been more effectively exploited to broaden the negotiations from their focus on power-sharing, wealth-sharing and security arrangements. The impression was given that these three subject areas, 'borrowed' from the structure of the north-south process, had already brought the talks close to the limits of complexity that they could handle.

A small but inclusive consultation for eastern Sudanese on access to resources in the region in February 2005 led to a continuing pre-negotiation effort on the east by Concordis International over the following months. Originally envisaged as an informal dialogue between the GoS and the Eastern Front (EF) following the NDA's June 2005 *Cairo Agreement*, the attempts stumbled over the EF's reluctance to engage in such low-profile meetings. The prospect of UN-mediated negotiations, suggested to the EF in mid-2005, confirmed their unwillingness to go down the informal route. It is important to recognize the crucial importance of

international publicity and profile for armed opposition groups. They are often keenly aware of their military weakness relative to governments and see international support and status as a powerful weapon to be exploited through the use of press statements. Unfortunately this can lead to hardening positions from which neither side can retreat, making it more difficult to accommodate compromise.

As an alternative means of moving the process forward after the UN mediation option dissipated, Concordis ran a series of workshops for the EF in November 2005 in Asmara, designed to help the EF unify and negotiate constructively and confidently, and continued to encourage them to negotiate with the GoS. Several different possibilities for mediation were considered over the following months and rejected by one side or the other, but the training provided by Concordis was a significant factor in the decision of the EF to enter the negotiations that opened in April 2006 under Eritrean mediation. These proceeded with limited external assistance and concluded in October 2006 with an agreement modelled on the CPA and DPA.

Conclusion

It is difficult to draw a clear picture of non-governmental involvement in Sudanese peacemaking, or even to determine what has been going on at any particular time. This is perhaps inevitable given the frequent need for discretion, as demonstrated by the early attempts to broker a Darfur ceasefire when media attention and press statements proved counter-productive.

What does seem clear, however, is that coordination between track two initiatives and the formal talks has generally been less than complete, especially during the IGAD and eastern negotiations. Reluctance to coordinate is understandable from the point of view of the official mediators, who may feel they have more than enough complication at the table without adding extra actors. Moreover, individual personal connections and animosities can play a role, as can resistance by one or both negotiating teams to any dilution of their profile or political influence. This may be a genuine fear, but it is essential for negotiators to stay in contact with their constituencies and to take account of the aspirations and fears represented there. As well as bolstering flagging track one processes, track two can play a crucial role in maintaining the links between negotiating parties and their constituencies, in ensuring that the broader picture is kept in view and in providing a non-threatening space for 'safe' consideration of constructive options. Any agreement that does not take into account the needs and concerns of the broader society or the root causes of the conflict is unlikely to be sustainable in the long term.