

# The delicate practice of supporting grassroots peacebuilding in southern Sudan

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The January 2005 *Comprehensive Peace Agreement* (CPA) marks a significant step in a lengthy struggle among Sudan's culturally diverse inhabitants in resolving how the country should be governed. The scepticism many share about its outcome is understandable: the causes of Sudan's conflicts run deep and any enduring resolution will entail difficult and lengthy processes of compromise and reconciliation. Attitudes and behaviours have to change for peace to really take root, demanding a more comprehensive transformation process beyond the limits of the bilateral political peace brokered under the CPA.

To safeguard against a return to conflict in the near future and improve the foundations for southern Sudan's new governance systems, the legacies of decades of conflict must be addressed. Sustained and sensitive support for bottom-up reconciliation initiatives in pursuit of stability and justice should be central to Sudan's recovery process. Thus far, grassroots peacebuilding initiatives have had a significant though largely overlooked impact upon the transition to peace. Reflecting on how these sensitive peacebuilding processes can be supported, this review focuses on the assistance provided by Pact and a number of collaborating peacebuilding organizations to primarily southern Sudanese grassroots initiatives.

## **The manipulation of inter-communal conflict**

The long history of inter-communal conflict in southern Sudan has bequeathed a rich peacebuilding heritage for regulating feuds through customary guidelines and institutions. However, clan rivalry became dangerously assimilated into the north-south war that emerged at independence and reignited in the early 1980s. With a decline in local governance systems, easy access to light weapons, and the use of militias by successive governments as proxy forces against the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), codes of warfare were undermined and the authority of elders and chiefs to lead peace initiatives diminished. Cattle raids became acts of military assault and women, children and other vulnerable groups were blatantly targeted. The situation became tragically worse after the SPLM/A split in 1991, aggravating existing political divisions and deepening ethnic factional fighting. This was particularly the case between the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups and within Nuer sections and clans.

Localized peacebuilding initiatives continued through the war years, but tended to be fragmented and vulnerable to political affiliations related to the wider war. Agreements rarely lasted. This tended to reinforce external perceptions that with peace, local conflicts would subside – a view overlooking the effect of the tactics of war on the civilian population and how local disputes were manipulated and entangled within the



broader war. Violent atrocities against civilians and the destabilization of livelihood systems wreaked havoc and incited revenge, and local societies became vulnerable to the schemes of armed groups and political interests.

### **Wunlit: the re-emergence of effective grassroots peace activities**

The New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) and its member churches had been attempting to reconcile southern factions since the early 1990s. The efforts had mostly failed and the NSCC's relationship with political movements became strained over time. However, after a 1997 rapprochement in Yei, it confirmed a mandate from the SPLM/A to pursue reconciliation and unity among southern politico-military groups. Inspired by the desire of divided Dinka and Nuer chiefs to meet and broker a peace, the NSCC turned to a more grassroots approach. After an initial dialogue in Lokichoggio, Kenya, it brought together community leaders from the two groups to reconcile their differences in a small border village called Wunlit in 1999. Grievances identified by the parties were aired and an agreement signed. As a meeting between the civil leadership of warring sections, rather than the military leaders of political factions, its success popularized the NSCC's blend of customary dispute resolution methods and modern approaches dubbed 'people-to-people' peace processes.

The Wunlit Covenant represented a remarkable achievement for grassroots conflict resolution and a glimmer of optimism in a bleak political landscape. The hope was that this agreement would inspire other community-based initiatives. The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) peace process may have been making little progress, but people at the grassroots considered unity among southerners to be an integral part of the quest for peace. Southern unity implied greater accountability from their political leaders and the NSCC highlighted the role community leaders could play in making political unions more successful.

The first test after Wunlit was when NSCC convened peace conferences in Upper Nile (Watt, November 1999 and Liliir, May 2000). The east bank, made up of many ethnic groups and political factions and the site of some of Sudan's most bitter conflicts, was a far more volatile and inaccessible ground than the area covered by the Wunlit Covenant, and agreements tended to falter.

An even greater challenge was mounted in 2001 when NSCC convened a 'strategic linkages' meeting in Kisumu, Kenya, with community leaders and members from the diaspora to bring grassroots perspectives to bear at the political level and persuade divided leaders to reconcile and unite. Its potential for success was limited after the SPLM/A shunned the meeting and obstructed participation, reflecting tensions over the control and direction of the local peacebuilding agenda.

Clearly, harnessing a revival of grassroots peacemaking and transforming 'Wunlit' into a force for change was not going to be easy, especially once imbued with wider political ambitions for change such as the call for unity and improved accountability among leaders. In effect, the status quo was being challenged. Elements within the SPLM/A became reticent towards the NSCC or sought to absorb the grassroots peace agenda. Peace fora frequently served as advantageous environments for political manoeuvring. A further challenge was related to the limited capacity to service scattered and fragile peace initiatives and organize them into a more cohesive 'peace movement.' With customary institutions faltering, few civil society institutions beyond the NSCC had sufficient credibility for this role.

Scaling up and deepening grassroots peacebuilding activities therefore presented many challenges, not least the potential for generating new sources of conflict. The process would require skilful stewardship by credible intermediary organizations with a keen insight into the political environment and detailed knowledge of the structures and processes of the south's many inter-communal conflicts.

## The Sudan Peace Fund: designing support for grassroots peacebuilding

Over the first three years of the people-to-people process, the NSCC fostered the spirit of Wunlit and raised the profile of grassroots perspectives. As a vehicle for political consensus, the process was reaching new constituencies, but remained tenuous as an organized movement. By 2002 the two main southern factions had merged and the improving prospects for peace were starting to bring a new urgency to the future role of grassroots peacebuilding. It was unclear how an emerging people-to-people movement might respond to the challenges ahead and how far the southern political elites could be influenced from the grassroots.

The timely creation of a three-year Sudan Peace Fund (SPF) by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 2002 brought about new developments within the people-to-people process. The US government had already established a mode of working in the south outside the strict humanitarian rubric of the time, and the SPF took this further by supporting people-to-people peacebuilding. The NSCC joined a consortium of agencies funded by the SPF and coordinated by Pact, also comprising the African Union Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources, Christian Aid and Pact Kenya. The SPF operated by providing grants to Sudanese organizations within an increasingly defined strategy and framework for conflict reduction and the promotion of stability. It added a broad range of complementary peacebuilding activities to the work championed by NSCC.

The program pursued a number of design features that later proved critical. Firstly, the programme structured its design on a rapid but participatory conflict mapping conducted in late 2002, involving analysis of the dominant disputes, their underlying structural and proximate causes, and linkages between conflicts. The majority were deemed to be ethnically-based with two thirds perceived as politicized (fuelled by external factors). In many instances, a weak, negligent, biased or 'missing' civil administration either perpetuated or intensified conflict. It was apparent that sustained conflict reduction would require institutionalized peacebuilding processes through, for example, peace committees and councils, and eventually new law and order institutions under a peace-time southern government. The mapping forewarned that a political settlement would not immediately do away with local conflicts, and could even intensify them for some time. Secondly, the complexity and multiple causes of conflict required a strategic and systematic approach. Discrete peacebuilding interventions could risk either precipitating another conflict or being undermined by adjacent insecurity. In response, the programme

grouped configurations of conflict and the strategies required to address them into geographical or thematic 'clusters.' The program engaged with eight major cluster areas in the south and three additional focus areas (Blue Nile, Southern Kordofan and the Bahr al-Ghazal border with South Darfur).

Thirdly, as the demand for peacebuilding support was likely to far exceed what the SPF could provide, a 'platform approach' was adopted, whereby the program was promoted as a wider platform to attract and fund the appropriate mix of interventions, facilitating the inclusion of other actors and technical expertise.

Fourthly, given the sensitivity of the issues faced and the propensity for political interests to try to commandeer local peace initiatives, maintaining a credible 'third party' positioning was exceptionally challenging. A set of principles to guide decision making and safeguard the legitimacy of people-led processes was adopted in order to keep grassroots analyses and preferences as central as possible.

All these facets were tied together under an emerging framework that, over time, moved towards identifying and including actors and institutions that stood the best chance of facilitating and sustaining people-led peace initiatives. It embodied the belief that effective conflict reduction and peacebuilding is subject not only to horizontal arbitration between divided communities, but also vertical relationships of accountability between the communities and their governing authorities. By establishing greater clarity around the roles of governmental and non-governmental actors, underscoring the need for democratic accountability and promoting greater complementarity between stakeholders around common goals, the prospect for enduring stability and peace is more likely to be attained.

### The SPF's contribution

The period 2002-05 witnessed tumultuous change. As the IGAD-sponsored process progressed, the programme faced an overwhelming demand for different forms of dialogue at the local level, including opportunities for divided communities to 'clear the air' before a new dispensation arrived and to address grievances before old scores got otherwise 'settled.' With so much of the leadership participating in the final phases of the peace process in Kenya, local tensions deepened as a result of the increasing governance vacuum and intense rivalry over positions and appointments prior to the formation of a new government in the south.

During this period, the SPF was prepared to adapt the people-to-people approach to newly arising challenges.

The promotion of stability and the anticipation of an agreement called for 'cross-line' dialogue (between communities separated by the civil war) as well as 'cross-border' dialogue (as a number of Sudan's international borders had been overrun with conflict and criminality). More 'rapid response' interventions (supporting communities to respond to unexpected flash points) were made than envisaged. Equally important was the dialogue demanded between civilians, the military and the civil authorities.

Flexibility was vital, and the SPF was able to annex a number of complementary recovery and transition programmes or governance-building initiatives. Their activities included disseminating news of peace-related developments (including translating resources into local languages), establishing peace committees, supporting the media or providing water services.

Assessing the SPF's specific impact is complex, yet evaluations of the support programme by USAID, the UK Department for International Development and an independent team commissioned by Pact endorsed the view that levels of conflict were reducing significantly and that informants believed that the situation would have been much worse without the programme's activities. Trends reported include less violent cattle raids or revenge killings, more cattle returns and compensations offered, and improved trading relations. Communities affected by or addressing conflict showed greater awareness of the causes of conflict and their potential roles as peace actors, developing confidence in their ability to influence events and the ability to exact greater responsiveness from their authorities to manage conflict and maintain peace. Overall, local peace initiatives and pro-peace constituencies expanded and became more institutionalized, though all observers emphasized how fragile the environment remained.

Grassroots peacebuilding has had a catalytic effect on governance by promoting improved interaction and collaboration between civil society and the governing authorities (be they the SPLM/A or other politico-military groups). Once genuine peace actors organize institutionally – whether in the form of peace councils, committees or customary institutions – then political exploitation tends to reduce, accountability increases, community cohesion improves and there is greater consensus over societal norms.

Capturing the impact grassroots initiatives have or have had on wider political processes such as the IGAD peace negotiations is much more complicated and deserves more specialized research. Where possible, 'vertical' linkages were fostered between local initiatives and higher level processes by raising awareness of developments in the peace process, promoting peace

initiatives as public platforms to express opinions and demands, and generally planning and adapting the people-to-people methodology in a way that was sensitive to political developments taking place at the IGAD level. Above all, the programme's experience of the past few years has underscored the view that without stability at the local level, any peace achieved at the political level remains extremely unsafe.

## Looking ahead

With southern Sudan engrossed in sweeping changes, it may be premature to determine the extent to which grassroots peacebuilding has lived up to the expectations of 1999, but the provisional evidence suggests that the foundations for a sustainable peace have greatly improved. The programme advocated for a holistic understanding of the wider peace process, linking the attainment of stability locally to the wider political search for peace. This vision should advance more effectively once integrated into the emerging governance system centred on the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS), but will take time to take root.

It was hoped that a distinct 'peace movement' would emerge, in which grassroots initiatives would join up institutionally, be represented transparently and produce the critical mass necessary for wider change. While falling short of this goal, developments are moving appreciably in that direction. Nevertheless, progress at the strategic level – where local initiatives are collectively steered and their potential harnessed – has not kept pace with developments locally. A critical challenge remains the slow growth of a broad-based leadership to drive the process forward, a project complicated further by the uncertain future of NSCC.

During the next few years, sensitive, informed and appropriate external support for grassroots peacebuilding should continue based on the rich experiences of the past six years. But this recommendation is not an enticement for multiple actors to hastily jump on a peacebuilding ticket. The next phase of support for community peacebuilding initiatives must intensify the organization and institutionalization of the process and engage the GoSS and grassroots representatives in dialogue over the collaborative roles and responsibilities of government, customary institutions, civil society, churches and external actors in a people-led peacebuilding framework and around a common vision for security and peace.