

Narrowing the Gap between Local and International Peacebuilding Efforts in South Sudan

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November 2017

South Sudan's current civil war, which began in December of 2013, remains of great regional, continental, and international concern. The escalation of the conflict has led to approximately 2.4 million internally displaced persons, tens of thousands of civilian deaths, food insecurity,¹ sexual violence,² and a refugee crisis that has strained the region and humanitarian efforts.³ Peace continues to elude the efforts of both international actors and the Government of South Sudan (GoSS). The failure to implement the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS)⁴ mediated by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in 2015,⁵ exemplifies the recent failure of current, top-down peace efforts.

The top-down 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 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.

Efforts from grassroots organizations that contribute to the peacebuilding process have been overlooked, underestimated, or considered as a secondary measure. In turn, the peace efforts and strategies employed by the local—such as community dialogue—which have a direct impact to the community, are generally less effective due to lack of support. The gap between the internationally led processes and locally conceived and driven solutions has undermined efforts towards peace in South Sudan.

Some recent efforts are a positive sign. The National Dialogue launched in 2017 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.⁶ Moreover, some international non-governmental organizations, such as the Crisis Management Initiative and Search for Common Ground, among others, have adapted their approaches to build on, facilitate, and support the work of local actors and processes. The United Nations has recently worked to highlight the necessity of inclusivity when it comes to peacebuilding.⁷

However, the nature of the conflict in South Sudan increases the importance of finding innovative peacebuilding strategies that will not only facilitate dialogue beyond just the elites and conflicting parties, but also promote inclusivity, ownership, and transference of agency to communities. This reform can be achieved through meaningful partnerships between local actors, national political actors, and the international community. Narrowing the gap between bottom-up and top-down approaches has never been more urgent.

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This publication was made possible by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed in this paper are solely the responsibility of the author and do not represent the views of the Wilson Center or the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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Policy Options and Recommendations

Ensuring sustainable peace through peacebuilding projects that develop effective relationships with local organizations and communities will require action on the part of both the international community, the Government of South Sudan, and local actors.

1. For the Government of South Sudan

- a. Ensure the full participation of local leaders in the National Dialogue:** The National Dialogue has been based on the notion of inclusivity and the GoSS should consider further development of channels for inclusive and open discussion.⁸ Given the importance of the inclusion of marginalized voices in encouraging the buy-in of peace at the local level, the GoSS should strive to create the political space for such open dialogue. This could be done by identifying local leaders, peace actors and processes, and by actively engaging them in the National Dialogue as representatives of their communities.
- b. Create a favourable environment for local NGOs to operate without intimidation:** In the past, the GOSS has taken measures that have made it harder for NGOs and grassroots organizations to operate. Such decisions were ostensibly taken to prevent members of the opposition from operating in the guise of NGOs. The 2015 Non-Governmental Organizations and Relief and Rehabilitation Commission Bills require NGOs to register and submit to constant monitoring by the government, including making available all sources of funding, and undergoing evaluations and audits.⁹ These measures have sometimes led to threats against local NGOs, both by the government and opposition supporters, and has diminished the confidence, and limited operational space and impact of local NGOs. The GoSS should consider lifting the burdensome registration restrictions on NGOs, ceasing their hostilities towards NGOs, and run campaigns to discourage intimidation of local organizations by government and opposition supporters alike.

2. For International State Actors

- a. Restructure peacebuilding interventions to establish links with local organizations:** Most international actors' engagement appears to be tilted in favour of elites, forgetting the potential power of local actors. The gap between international actors and the local can lead to misrepresentation, or no representation of local grievances in strategies formed by international organizations. Fostering dialogue could bridge this gap. International actors can more thoroughly consult with local organizations in South Sudan. Consultations with genuine, open, and continual dialogue will promote the exchange of ideas and further collaboration to develop bottom-up peacebuilding approaches. The decentralization of peace initiatives will help diffuse responsibility for peacebuilding from political elites to grassroots and local actors, further allowing for more effective and tailored processes.
- b. IGAD-Plus should include local stakeholders in the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Committee and revitalization process:** IGAD member countries,ⁱ IGAD-Plus,ⁱⁱ and the IGAD Partners Forum (IPF) should consider inviting local groups to the table for the revitalization of ARCSS. The revitalization process was borne out of the need to implement the agreement which initially had very minimal representation, excluding most local actors. The engagement of the local will not only ensure group ownership of the peace agreement, but it will also facilitate citizens putting pressure on the government to uphold the agreement. Local groups to be included in the revitalization process should represent youth, women, civil society, religious groups, traditional leaders from key areas (especially areas with a lot of active conflict), local government, parliamentarians, and National Dialogue committees. These local groups can fill important roles in the revitalization process, including for direct representation, consultation, observers, and participants.

ⁱ Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya

ⁱⁱ The African Union, United Nations, China, U.S., U.K., European Union, and Norway

3. For International Non-Governmental Actors

a. Focus efforts on building and strengthening the capacity of the local actors to build genuine

partnerships: International NGOs could effectively use the financial resources they have to help build the capacity of local groups, especially the ones in states where there is active conflict, including Jonglei, Western Equatoria, Western Equatoria, Central Equatoria, Lakes, and Unity.¹⁰ However, in some instances, relationships between INGOs and local NGOs in South Sudan are characterized by paternalism. More could be done to develop meaningful partnerships that involve exchanging of ideas and skills, with the intent of external organizations implementing projects that also include existing local ideas and methods. INGOs need to recognize the efforts of local peace initiatives as potential project starting points and foundations, rather than necessarily introducing new, unknown programs and strategies.

For an in-depth analysis of peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan, specifically the relationship between bottom-up and top-down approaches to peacebuilding, see the accompanying Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding Research Paper No. 20 by Emmaculate Asige Liaga.

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