

Southern Sudan at Odds with Itself: Dynamics of conflict and predicaments of peace

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Summary and Review

A new research report into local violent conflicts within southern Sudan provides useful and intriguing insights into the processes generating and sustaining conflicts. It debunks some important assumptions. The research team was based at the LSE, commissioned through PACT Sudan and funded by DFID. The researchers conducted more than 300 extensive interviews in diverse parts of southern Sudan.

The standard explanations for ongoing violence in southern Sudan, emanating from both the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) and some advocates, are to blame Khartoum's intrigues and "tribalism". Unsurprisingly, both these accounts are unsubstantiated and inaccurate. Although many people, especially local administrators, alleged that there was a hidden hand of northern Sudanese destabilization, there was almost no evidence adduced in support of such an opinion. Where specific groups, such as the Fellata Ambororo, were present and widely perceived as being northern-sponsored troublemakers, the actual evidence implicating them was thin to non-existent. To the contrary, much specific information and analysis was provided for the local origins of conflicts over resources and territory, cattle raiding, and other violent disputes.

"Tribal conflict" has been used as shorthand for almost any violent conflict, whether within or between tribal units, and therefore its explanatory value is rather small.

In reality, the source of much of today's conflict within southern Sudan is closely associated with the difficulties faced by the GoSS in handling competing political and governmental projects, such as capacity-building alongside decentralization, and consolidation of central authority alongside democratization. Typically, local administrators such as county commissioners are former military commanders, selected for their loyalty to the SPLM, who rely on patronage and tribal identities to build a local power base. This political process is occurring alongside a weak or nonexistent peace dividend in terms of development, the lack of law enforcement and other administrative capacity, and tensions arising over unclear administrative boundaries, competition over natural resources and resources dispensed by the GoSS (often in an opaque manner with perceived unfairness across communities), and population movements associated with returnees from towns and northern Sudan. A particular problem is that GoSS practice in establishing local government blurs the distinction between ethnic and administrative boundaries, leaving it open for local officials to create fiefdoms based on ethnic patronage. Given the amount of inter-ethnic mixing and population movement that occurred during the war and continues today, this is bound to generate conflict. In short, the mode and context of establishing state institutions is itself a cause of conflict.

The widespread belief that the causes of conflict are northern destabilization and tribalism has contributed to responses to the problem that are limited, incomplete and in some cases may actually have exacerbated conflict itself.

Most practical effort within southern Sudan, by local officials, chiefs, church leaders and NGOs, is expended on responding to inter-communal violence. However, the report finds a lack of clarity about what such peacebuilding entails. There are contradictory views on what constitutes an authentic or effective process. While some people argue that external actors should stay out, leaving local peace to traditional authorities that are capable of handling it alone, others see material resources to deliver a peace dividend and governance institutions such as law enforcement as essential components of peacebuilding.

In these circumstances, there are many efforts at peacebuilding, mostly focused on inter-tribal peace conferences, which have a very uncertain record of delivery. There is a lot of discussion at these conferences, which generates communication and goodwill. However, the outcomes rarely specify in detail who has the responsibility for further activities and especially implementation of recommendations. The channels of communication that are opened are not often sustained, through lack of investment in follow up.

In addition, the governance structure implicit in a peace conference is one that treats people as tribal subjects rather than citizens. The process privileges chiefs, many of whom have uncertain authority (and in this context we must note that many peoples in southern Sudan do not historically possess chiefly authorities, and such that existed have been undermined and distorted by decades of war, and by changing power relations consequent on the proliferation of light weapons among young men). The definition of the conflicts as “tribal”, and thus amenable to tribally-based reconciliation efforts, can be counterproductive insofar as it reinforces a particular definition of the conflict and lends itself to the interests of chiefs in consolidating their position and their patriarchal and conservative form of governance.

Also, the local-international dynamics of a peace process have their own impact on governance: “Usually facilitated with outside help, the proliferation of peace conferences has created a paradoxical situation for many local leaders in which their power is expressed by the ability to fundraise for a local conference and gather support of an aid agency, yet simultaneously undermining their own authority to solve local problems without outside help. By defining conflicts as local and tribal, peace conferences have neglected the broader political context.” (p. 10)

Most importantly, the peace conference approach emphasizes one aspect of governance—inter-communal relations—at the expense others, which include institution building, development and democracy:

“Descriptions of peace meetings emphasise centrality of dialogue, compromise, forgiveness and negotiation – an approach that creates disjointed peace efforts by excluding issues of governance, such as accountability, justice, restitution, law enforcement and broader national

peace processes despite better knowledge that these are vital for a comprehensive process. In fact, a number of respondents felt that peace meetings undermine the establishment of a strong rule of law, especially conferences that assumed that people could reconcile without a justice or reparation component. In contrast, programmes that address the structural causes of conflict and include addressing shortages in resources or infrastructure are more positively received by communities and are deemed to have long-term meaningful outcomes in conflict mitigation programming.” (p 76)

The CPA itself contains no mechanisms for addressing local conflicts, but in principle it sets up institutions for dealing with them – at such a time as they mature. With the onerous demands on the GoSS, governance capacities that can stand above, and effectively manage, such conflicts, is some way into the future. Putting in place the fabric for social peace is, ad interim, a valuable exercise, but as the report explains in some detail, it may have problematic consequences in the longer term.

One salutary finding of the survey is that a large minority of southerners (43%) believed that there will be a new north-south war (28% believed not, the remainder didn't know), and that nearly as many believed there will be south-south violence in the near future (38%, but with 47% believing that there would be no such violence).

Fear of a new war instigated by northern Sudan is clearly widespread among southern Sudanese, and is a strong influence on southern Sudanese politics. However, an interesting finding reported is that many respondents believed that the GoSS preoccupation with the perceived threat from the north is diverting attention from internal problems including conflicts. In particular, many people see the referendum not just as an opportunity to vote for secession but also to address governance issues within southern Sudan.

“Some respondents pointed out that the single-issue debate, centred on the question of whether the outcome would be unity or separation, was misleading. The referendum is viewed as an opportunity to incite, push and support lasting change within the south. Indeed, some pointed out that GoSS was muffling its own support for separation by pitting the referendum debate solely against the north, rather than encouraging a credible and diverse political system to foster political debate and give a glimpse of a different political culture. Criticism about the way elections were conducted has made this point even more important.” (p. 31)

The report does not delve into the GoSS programmes of disarming the civilian population, which have been justified in part by the belief that armed civilians will be the basis for future northern destabilization. Disarmament programmes have been not only a major source of violence in southern Sudan, but incomplete or inequitable disarmament, can be a contributor to conflict. Where one community believes that it has been disarmed and its neighbours have not (which, according to this report, is very common) it is likely to rearm itself and distrust the authorities. Cattle herders who have lost livestock to rustlers and raiders are also likely to acquire new arms and to suspect and resist or evade any new disarmament exercises.

The report has (thankfully) no catalogue of recommendations, but rather proposes new ways of approaching the challenge of ending armed conflicts within southern Sudan. The authors recommend four areas of focus:

- (1) Providing a tangible “peace dividend” focused upon the improvement of infrastructure.
- (2) Re-thinking the process of administrative decentralization which has contributed to local divisions and the “tribalization” of administrative units.
- (3) Addressing the lack of clarity of political structures and development approaches, which refers to the incompatibility, at least in the short term, between the goals of decentralization, democratization, and the consolidation of the GoSS’s political authority.
- (4) Putting into practice an ongoing and inclusive commitment to make peacebuilding a long-term, accountable and multi-faceted endeavour. The proliferation of short-term, donor-financed, fragmented and ad hoc or single-purpose peace initiatives needs to be replaced by a more strategic approach that overcomes all of these shortcomings.