

South Sudan

Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund (POF)

Learning towards a national agenda for reconciliation

Review of key national-level peace and reconciliation initiatives, 2012–2020 – recurring patterns and themes

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Contents

Preface	1
1 Introduction	3
2 Recurring Patterns and Themes	3
2.1 Methodology	3
2.2 Ownership	6
2.3 Surrounding tensions	8
2.4 Leadership	10
3 Concluding thoughts	12
3.1 Guiding questions to take a conversation forward	13
Bibliography	15

Preface

Background

The R-ARCISS foreshadows the creation of a Ministry of Peace and also a Commission on Truth, Reconciliation and Healing. This follows in the footsteps of a series of initiatives since 2012: beginning with the Government-led Journey for National Healing and Reconciliation (2012-13), the church-led Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation (CNHPR, 2013-2015), then the bifurcation into the (a) church-led Action Plan for Peace (2015-present); and (b) the National Dialogue (2015-present). Under the National Pre-Transition Committee, there has been a sub-unit on Peace and Reconciliation. Throughout, the structures of the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission have remained, as well as the Specialised Parliamentary Committee on Peace and Reconciliation.

Existing documentation of knowledge

There have been official handover processes between these initiatives, and some transfer of knowledge through individuals who have been involved throughout. There has also been some degree of ancillary research and initiatives outside these processes.

The South Sudan Law Society study in 2015 is a more quantitative inquiry into perceptions on justice, truth, healing and reconciliation (Deng, et al., 2015). It introduces findings based on more than 1,500 interviews that relate to: the scale and impact of trauma, notions of restorative and retributive justice, criminal accountability, the impact of conflict on inter-communal relations, and truth-seeking and reparation. From the data, the report proposes eight recommendations on design and implementation of

programmes, two relating to trauma and mental health support, and two now less relevant recommendations on the IGAD process.

Christian Aid's more qualitative approach draws on 50 practitioner interviews and 10 case studies that explore primarily sub-national experiences of peacebuilding across the country (Christian Aid, 2018). The synthesis 'lessons' and 'implications' offer a useful architecture of principles that should inform a holistic approach to peacebuilding agenda.

There have also been reflections on the formation of the Commission on Truth, Reconciliation and Healing; with a policy brief in the relatively early stages of the peace agreement in 2016 that ends with high level recommendations on the design of the body (Deng & Willems, 2016).

A key gap in the documented knowledge

Notwithstanding these important contributions, there is no digestible synthesis of the lessons learned or reflection among key actors as to how lessons from the earlier national-level processes could be integrated into the structures foreshadowed in the R-ARCISS.

There is a regular echo of consensus that South Sudan's agenda for reconciliation needs to be indigenous to the country and based on the particularity of the experience here. The Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund is pursuing elsewhere in its programme of activity deeper inquiry into cultural and traditional approaches. It would be logical as part of this framework of designing an approach unique to South Sudan that there is consideration of the processes to-date that have been South Sudan led.

With this in mind, the POF commissioned this review. Both the Team Leader and the Deputy Team Leader of the POF have been involved at different points throughout the history of the national-level processes. This presents, on the one hand, a conflict of interest that needs to be declared. On the other hand, it is also reflective of a reality in South Sudan that a number of actors – South Sudanese and international – have remained engaged across long periods. There are pitfalls in this reality, but there is also great potential in drawing together the experience of those who have been closely involved to feed into the next steps.

Towards a wider conversation

The original concept of the review was more comprehensive and would have involved a significant engagement in Juba with key actors. This was not possible once COVID-19 restrictions came into force. Whilst the final cross-section of interviewees includes both South Sudanese and international voices, all of whom have played significant roles in the process, this review is only a step in what needs to be a wider conversation. The intention is that the discussion, findings and questions that the reviewer articulates below can be a foundation for that conversation.

1 Introduction

The author of the review that follows, David Bloomfield, has been engaged with South Sudan since 2013, and has worked for many years on reconciliation in various countries.

This review focuses mainly on:

- **The Journey of Healing for National Reconciliation**, 2012-2013
- **The Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation**, 2013-2015
- **The Action Plan for Peace**, 2016-onwards
- **The National Dialogue**, 2016-onwards

It also mentions the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission, the National Platform for Peace and Reconciliation (NPPR), and the National Legislative Assembly Special Committee for Peace and Reconciliation.

What follows are recurring patterns and themes identified in the Initiatives across time. They are based on interviews with 16 people, variously engaged in the Initiatives under review, during 6-23 April 2020, and on a review of documentation from the initiatives.

The review should be read as an opinion piece, rather than a definitive analysis. It also assumes a level of background knowledge and deliberately does not enter into comprehensive descriptive detail. The aim is to offer some learning from past experience, which might serve to inform revitalised discussions among South Sudanese actors on a vision and a plan for effective reconciliation.

Where “double quotation marks” are used, this indicates a direct, but unattributed, quote from an interview.

2 Recurring Patterns and Themes

2.1 Methodology

2.1.1 The **core methodology** remains largely consistent

The plan of the Journey of Healing was originally to engage with various representative groups (farmers, women, youth, etc.) in “a dialogue at the Centre that would be short.” This was quickly revised, because of political rivalries over control of a centralised process, to a “broader process: decentralising it and building a process back up to the centre eventually, with consultations along the way... The inspiration was having watched so much crumbling on the local level because it was never anchored to the national. The Committee gave it buy-in rapidly.”

So the basic model became one of country-wide ‘grass-roots’ consultations and data-gathering, feeding back up through various levels to an ultimate national process or event. From the Journey of Healing to the National Dialogue, this has been refined, but remains essentially the same. It has a Pyramid approach, generally starting at the wide

bottom with local consultations, and moving upward to the narrow top, a national conference or event.

To all but the National Dialogue, training has also been central to provide personnel ('peace ambassadors/mobilisers') who would facilitate the local consultations/dialogues and gather data. Some of those trained for the Journey of Healing fed into CNHPR, which trained more, and subsequently into the SSCC Action Plan for Peace. The National Dialogue created its own large Secretariat and Steering Committee who led the local consultations and listening exercises.

Much was made in every Initiative of the importance of 'grass-roots' activities. However, whether this ever happened in sustained fashion is unclear, since many of the local activities engaged with what could be called local elites, and reached in reality only as far as "grass-tops." Perhaps these elites could represent their grass-roots, and it is hard to see how any of the Initiatives could realistically have dug down further. Many in South Sudan claim to have grass-roots networks, but in reality probably only the Churches could claim to have effective influence at that lowest of local levels.

Nonetheless, this Pyramid approach has proven to be a feasible and robust approach that seems to resonate across South Sudanese culture and society.

2.1.2 A **confusion** as to whether the Initiative is engaging in actual reconciliation, or exploring what form a reconciliation process should take

This applies in particular to Church-led Initiatives. CNHPR, for example, was training peace mobilisers to go to communities and record their stories, needs, and opinions on the form of a future reconciliation process. Meanwhile, leading figures in the Initiative were declaring at the national level the need to reconcile, before the evidence was gathered as to how that should work. The role of the trained peace mobilisers was weakly defined to begin with (their title suggests a very broad peacemaking role), and only in later stages was there an increased focus on training them specifically for data-collection.

The confusion is understandable, to a degree: the activities of CNHPR, as with the APP later, were based on the concept of dialogue. Specifically, this was meant to refer to consultations with communities. But dialogue is also, in practice, a key tool of reconciliation and healing, where it refers to dialogue between victims and offenders, or their communities. Unhelpfully, though, the difference between consultation activities (dialogue to gather information) and reconciliation activities (dialogue to repair relationships) was frequently elided. Indeed, there was a continued lack of emphasis on defining the various terms, concepts and tools within the Initiatives' remit (and also those outside it) which must have fed the overall lack of clarity (see also 2.1.4).

The National Dialogue did not suffer this terminological confusion, but then its remit was much wider than reconciliation. To shape its dialogues, it designed a questionnaire that "basically asked two questions: What is wrong with the country? And, What is the solution?" This all-inclusive approach thus avoided any confusion of terms or methods, but produced a far broader inventory of ills and cures, opinions and demands, across the whole spectrum of governance, economy, culture, social system, etc.

2.1.3 A predominance of **one-off events** or short-term activities, at the expense of a sustained process

Many early efforts to address reconciliation at national or lower levels initially amounted to short-term interventions or one-off events, where a conversation within a community or between communities would be held and reconciliation then declared to be complete. Over time, practitioners realised that the subject matter needed more long-term attention and sustained focus. But frequently the challenges of increased insecurity or diminished resources – the simple logistics of sustaining efforts over time in rapidly-changing and always challenging circumstances – meant that even those processes designed to run long-term became reduced to the short-term, or ran into problems after their beginnings and planned follow-up proved impossible.

But the result of this pattern over time has been to encourage people to view reconciliation as being attempted in ways that are too fast and too superficial to resonate with any depth within communities: “There have been far too many meetings in grand hotels.” “Elites hold a dialogue with each other, and then report the results to other elites.” For many clergy, “reconciliation is a life-style, not an event.” But most would agree that the problem was not only the one-off, short-term approach, but that even such meetings needed a preparatory phase: “trust-building must precede any co-operative Initiatives.”

2.1.4 A **lack of shared definitions of basic concepts** and the implications for implementation/co-operation

Since reconciliation is a common-usage word in English (relating to many things, from balancing bank accounts to managing deep-seated differences), everyone believes they know already what it means. In South Sudan, there have been few efforts either to create a clear definition that will be used in a specific Initiative, or to work with others to reach a common definition. Moreover, there has been little differentiation of reconciliation from other important terms: peace, peace-building, justice, transitional justice, healing, forgiveness, reparation, and so on. So reconciliation Initiatives have regularly strayed into peace-building, which is a much broader activity than dealing with relationships fractured by past violence. CNHPR, for example, cannot be blamed for inheriting this sort of confusion along with the implied mandate of its name. But there seemed to be little effort to separate out what healing, peace and reconciliation might constitute in the practical outworking of the Initiative, either by the President, who created the CNHPR by decree, or by those who subsequently directed it and formed its policy and practice. Increasingly therefore, ‘reconciliation’ dialogues would stray freely into issues of governance, politics, justice issues, compensation, etc., while leaving many people to apply their own existing definition, according to their own priorities, and thus raise unreal expectations. So internal unclarity bred a wider uncertainty and confusion.

Perhaps only the National Dialogue avoided straying outside the remit, simply by employing a remit that included everything (governance, justice, peace, reconciliation, and so on), thus allowing contributions on almost any subject deemed relevant by those consulted. It remains to be seen how manageable it will be to analyse usefully such an array of input.

Differing definitions, or the lack of them, of key terms existed between leaderships in Juba and people in 'grass-roots' communities; between Church leaders and politicians; between South Sudanese actors and international actors; and on occasion between donors.

For example, cultural understandings of restorative justice may differ greatly across South Sudan. Some of those who have lost homes or communities or cattle may see it clearly as a matter of compensation. They engage in reconciliation dialogues in order to tell of their loss, but with an expectation that it will lead to compensation or reparations, rather than as a step to restoring relations.

It is a bitter irony that those countries who most need to deal with the injustices of a violent conflict have the most impoverished resources to do so because of the conflict's effects. So, even in South Africa, reparations rarely came in financial form. Two important alternatives are usually pursued: symbolic reparations (memorials, remembrance days, construction of community service buildings, and so on) and formal acknowledgement of losses suffered and wrongs done (official statements of sympathy and condemnation, etc.). Only an early and painfully clear expression of the limits of reconciliation and restorative justice, by the leadership, will avoid over-expectation and subsequent disappointment. But there was no evidence of this.

2.2 Ownership

2.2.1 A self-belief that **Churches are natural bringers of peace, and that they 'own' reconciliation**

Reconciliation is a human social interaction in all cultures. The Church of course has an emphasis on peace, reconciliation and forgiveness, but not a monopoly. And experience has repeatedly shown that its representatives are no more immune from human fallibilities than any others.

In South Sudan, there is a strong spiritual dimension to reconciliation, and this is, by definition, where the Church can play its strongest role. Indeed no other actor can take this work on. But there is more to reconciliation than the spiritual. It also functions as a pragmatic conflict-resolution method for community leaders, and in the political realm. Reconciliation involves all strands and sectors of a society, and cannot be carried solely by one actor. Civil society, political leaders and others have complementary roles to play that cannot be contracted out to, or played by, the Church. But the Church tried repeatedly to subsume reconciliation under its own mantle, and then to protect it from the engagement of others. This shows an overly-narrow understanding of the term, and has led to outbreaks of protectionism and rivalry (see 2.2.3), and a weakening of the very initiatives themselves (2.2.2).

The Churches chose not to engage with the National Dialogue, perhaps to stay outside and maintain the independence of their "prophetic voice," and perhaps to protect their own Action Plan for Peace. (Whether they saw the APP as an alternative to, or a complement of the National Dialogue, the former was always their priority, and they would have continued with it even if they had joined the ND.)

In any case, there was at the time a widespread unease at supporting a government reconciliation initiative when the same government seemed to be at war with its own

people, simultaneously sending out both dialogue-facilitators and helicopter gunships from Juba to the country.

Political leaders have a role in reconciliation unique to their position that no religious leaders – or indeed anyone else – can play (see 2.2.2).

2.2.2 Tensions around **the essentially political nature of a reconciliation process**

Frequently, there were attempts to de-politicise a reconciliation Initiative, to “protect it from the politics.” This particularly applied to Church-led Initiatives, and was often a response to political pressures, expected or actual: an attempt to protect the Initiative with an aura of ‘neutrality.’ But in a conflict, everything is political. And reconciliation is far from the soft, non-political activity that some think it (“a woolly-jumper process” of interpersonal interaction). It is intrinsically linked to the group interests and group differences that drive politics. To try to de-politicise it simultaneously hobbles the process from the start, and reduces in advance the significance of its outcomes. With CNHPR in particular, this problem was caused essentially by the government “contracting out” the reconciliation process to the Committee, but still wishing to influence it. The Churches’ decision to remain outside the National Dialogue (until a very late stage, at least) to maintain their independence and their “prophetic voice” seemed not to strengthen their own “parallel” efforts with the Action Plan for Peace.

From its outset, the Journey of Healing was politically-led, given that it was under the Vice-President’s auspices, but that political alignment brought its rapid downfall (see 7).

The National Dialogue was also a political process from the start, though its political nature was more in its establishment than in its actual processes and activities. Indeed, it was initially hoped that its establishment would “reflect a more positive image of the President.” But having played the role of official sponsor at the start, the President was persuaded to recuse himself from the role, given the serious problems of credibility and inclusion which his ownership had immediately caused. The problems did not disappear immediately, but over time some of the scepticism of political bias subsided, as the published reports of local and then regional Dialogues were “very frank, completely negative, very critical of government and all sides in politics.”

But CNHPR and the National Dialogue experiences highlight a tension over ownership. If the government ‘contracts out’ the job of reconciliation, the effectiveness and resilience of the Initiative is weakened. But if government, in a divided politics, takes ownership of the process, then credibility is undermined as it becomes rapidly and wholly politicised.

Initiatives to date have veered between contracting out or government control. But given that a range of actors are required to play differing roles in a reconciliation process – government, the Churches, civil society, etc. – this tension between contracting out and government control is not an either/or one to be resolved. Rather it is a tension to be continually managed, so that each agency inputs its necessary contribution towards the broad, shared process of reconciliation.

However a reconciliation Initiative is established, and however its ownership is handled, there is another role for government and political leadership/s, quite separate and indispensable. Political leadership in reconciliation must be seen to articulate and actively nurture the vision for reconciliation. This includes leading by example: public

acts of co-operation between leaders, symbolic conciliatory actions by them, regular public statements to manage expectations, and – as the ultimate authority in the nation – the official government acknowledgement of wrongs done and hurts suffered, and the formal endorsement of Initiatives and their final outcomes. None of these actions have been seen thus far, given that for a long time politics itself has been divided or non-functional. But they are the exclusive role of government, they will have to happen, and they cannot be contracted out.

2.2.3 Inter-agency competition

A tendency to view responsibility for reconciliation as a zero-sum activity, where it must be protected from the interference of others, has produced a pattern of rivalry and, sometimes, turf-wars.

From the very first Initiative, the Journey of Healing, reconciliation was instrumentalised in a battle between the President and Vice-President. This rivalry, in lethal form again by 2016, undercut attempts to form the National Dialogue, and the initial design required major structural changes and much sustained effort to generate any credibility. Only in its later stages, with movement towards agreement on the R-ARCISS, was it possible to claim any degree of wider acceptance among the population and across politics.

When reconciliation was contracted out to the Church, inter-agency rivalries sprang up. The NPPR, created as a means to make a joint response to the outbreak of violence among different players, could not sustain the co-operation beyond a few months, and indeed NPPR itself, as it garnered UNDP support, became another rival, especially for CNHPR. From the start of its operation, CNHPR suffered from tensions between it and the SSCC, and between the Churches themselves. When the CNHPR mandate was taken on by the SSCC in the form of the Action Plan for Peace, the SSCC, impressively re-energised after a painful but successful process of self-criticism and reorganisation, at first forged ahead. But in time, it too began to suffer from tensions within its ranks, and within its member churches.

Donors and international actors, too, were from time to time embroiled in all of this, with negative effect (see 2.3.2).

2.3 Surrounding tensions

2.3.1 A declining political and security context which undermines Initiatives, activities and co-operation

From the start, political instability, and later insecurity, dogged all Initiatives. It was the rivalry between the President and Vice-President that stopped the Journey to Healing in its tracks in 2013. This was replaced by CNHPR, which held a retreat in Kuron in December of that year, where personnel developed their identity and drew up a strategic plan for action. Within a week of their return to Juba, the violence broke out. The plan they were then trying to work from “had been devised for peace-time,” and as the violence spread and insecurity spiralled, the Committee was bound to struggle. A joint statement on the violence from the PRC, CNHPR and the Parliamentary Special

Committee on Peace and Reconciliation signalled the creation of the NPPR, but the co-operation could not be sustained over time.

The background of insecurity continued to undermine every subsequent Initiative by making the operational environment impossibly difficult. With just the logistical challenges of travel, safety, procurement, and so on, training events, meetings and public events became hugely difficult. Event processes were begun, only to fail under this pressure after the first event and so continuity and momentum were impossible to sustain.

For non-government Initiatives, all the political uncertainty and the growing insecurity also put grave pressure on individuals, especially leaders, as well as their institutions. To be a public figure in such a context brings serious and unrelenting tensions. Capacities and support may have been reduced but, conversely, popular expectations merely grew under the pressure (see 2.4.1).

The National Dialogue was born amidst what was effectively an ongoing war, and suffered immediately from the inability to pursue a non-partisan path through a completely split polity. The international community grew extremely sceptical of an Initiative launched by what they perceived as a narrow, biased and partial government. It was only during and after the R-ARCISS agreements that it could begin to build any credibility and move away from the divisive rifts that had hampered its perception from the start. But while it usefully generated the airing and documentation of a huge range of forcefully-expressed grievances, it continued to be seriously hampered by the IO/government rivalry throughout.

2.3.2 Inconsistencies among the **donor/international community** over time

Prior to 2012, almost all donor focus had been on state-building, and on capacity-building within the new government. Little attention had been focused on nation-building initiatives, including reconciliation. But when political tensions erupted in 2013, there was a shift of interest away from political actors and processes, as donors became nervous, and reconciliation seemed a “softer and safer” option. Many donors were interested in CNHPR, though not many finally committed to support it. As the reality dawned that even reconciliation was political, the mood among donors changed again.

Donor-partner tensions exist in any context. But the particular pressures of South Sudan – building a new nation from the ground up, emerging from a devastating war, dealing with a violent past, and then a relapse into something that threatened to spill into civil war – magnified what might have been manageable tensions.

Donor policy seemed to South Sudanese actors to be inconsistent over time: donors liked reconciliation, then they didn't; donors saw the churches as ‘safe,’ then they didn't. And over the years, depending on the context, the partners involved and the initiatives proposed, donors seemed to switch back and forward. They were quick to withdraw support when a process became problematic for them; they seemed less ready to learn from the experience and adapt the process accordingly.

In turn, South Sudanese partners seemed to donors to be resistant to the operational methods preferred by the donors, in particular on project management and financial accountability. “[Partners] used us like an ATM.”

Simply put, when donors were supporting Initiatives, their technical agendas were mismatched to those of South Sudanese partners. There were long arguments about “donor logos on our plans,” and well-intentioned anti-corruption policies that in reality undercut the effectiveness of what was being supported because donors believed “there was a real risk of monetising peacebuilding.”

With the Churches, regarding the CNHPR and the APP, the mismatch was significant. People within the churches accused donors of “projectising” the Church and the SSCC, by insisting on monitoring and evaluation processes, outcome and performance indicators, management styles, etc. “Churches were expected to be NGOs.” Under ‘capacity-building,’ “donors were remaking institutions in their own likeness.” These tensions were high. On the one hand, donors needed to monitor and report progress and good practice according to set templates to their headquarters. But they were “sometimes over-directive and rigid. Accountability is vital, but so is adaptability and responsiveness.” On the other hand, partners desperately needed money for their Initiatives but worked to “visions rather than strategic plans.” Their need increased the pattern of donor-dependency. National partners “weren’t clear on their plans and priorities. They weren’t focusing on what they wanted for South Sudan, but on what they needed to please donors.”

In essence, a lot of the tension was centred on the short-term donor modus operandi, in conflict with the Churches’ long-term vision. This “clash of cultures brought out the worst of both.” While monitoring and evaluation was essential, “it was implemented poorly, without sensitivity”. A consistent donor platform was largely lacking (despite efforts to form a Donor Working Group on Reconciliation), as was a capacity among partners to translate “visions” into “clear plans and priorities.” The results were serious rifts between partners and donors, and disagreements at times between donors, on working concepts and definition of terms, and in methodologies.

As a government-led Initiative, in contrast, the National Dialogue received some initial external funding, but as time went on there was considerable international scepticism and even antagonism. Eventually – with a few exceptions – the Dialogue was almost wholly government-funded. One effect of this was that the “government had a stake in the process, and in a successful outcome.”

2.4 Leadership

2.4.1 A steady **deterioration of relationships** among institutions or individuals, both internally (personal animosities) and externally (turf wars)

Through the era of the church-led Initiatives CNHPR and the APP, which includes also the PRC, the NPPR, and the SPC, the atmosphere has generally been one of a zero-sum, competitive contest between agencies and between their leaderships. This is certainly by no means to accuse church leaders of any special tendency in that regard. There may have been human weaknesses on display, as there always are, but the point is that these leaderships were operating under intense personal, political and public pressures. And successes were hard to find. Personal exhaustion set in: “They were all ground down eventually, emptied.” So frustrations, fears and doubts manifested as sharp rivalry and

occasionally serious ill-feeling. Little if any support, or outlet, for leaders to manage their internal tensions was provided. “The situation was so complex that it needed strong leadership. But we [also] need to look after our leaders.”

While the NPPR represented an effort at symbolic unity under pressure, it could not sustain that over time, and relapsed into rivalries and competition.

Within CNHPR, there were tensions among the Committee, and between CNHPR and other Churches. And while the first peace-mobiliser training at Yei has rightly been noted as perhaps the major achievement of CNHPR, it also contributed. Many of the personnel (almost all of them non-South Sudanese) spent more than a week in Caux, Switzerland, strategising for the Yei training. Then they were absent during the training for over a month. A degree of distance began to grow between those remaining in Juba and those far away “in the Yei bubble.” To some in Juba, there was a perception that all the decisions were being made elsewhere. Accurate or not, that perception arose from a lack of clarity and inclusion in some of the decision-making processes.

Similar tensions arose around the APP, emerging between the SSCC and the Churches, between Churches, between local ICC members and central SSCC leadership, and around the SSCC leadership.

A crucial source of pressure on leaders has been the high expectations raised by each new Initiative. This has variously come from the population at large, from the political leadership, from the international community or, on occasion, from the individuals themselves. Without clear statements of what reconciliation means (including what it is not), and on how a reconciliation process will roll out, then everyone was free to define it for themselves according to their needs and proceed to expect those needs to be met (see 4). This put immense pressure on those seen as figureheads to provide everything to everyone, (“they were seen almost as messianic”), and on their under-resourced institutions and Initiatives. Expectations need to be managed from the start; left unchecked, they almost guarantee disappointment and perceived failure. They encourage hopes of fast results and quick fixes, rather than complex long-term processes.

2.4.2 An expectation of **large structures** to deliver what is required

Attention has already been drawn to the hierarchical pyramid structure of most Initiatives: the Journey of Healing, the CNHPR, the Action Plan for Peace and the National Dialogue (see 1). This favoured approach combines top-down and bottom-up dimensions. It has rarely been questioned, but rather inherited largely wholesale at each successive Initiative, because it seems to resonate within society. That inheritance, however, does not seem to have included learning from past Initiatives. Nonetheless, it is a complex structure for a resource-poor and logistically challenged environment. But it does allow for most of what a reconciliation process requires: the acknowledgement of community-level grievances and suffering, as well as the expression at national level of co-operative practices and acknowledgement of wrongs done and losses suffered. A national dimension to the reconciliation process is necessary. While by definition that means large, it does not mean a formulaic repetition of what has already been repeated more than once.

However, the ARCISS enshrined three even larger structures for reconciliation and transitional justice: a Commission for Truth, Healing and Reconciliation (CTRH), a Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS), and a Compensation and Reparation Authority (CRA).

For the most part, these are based on institutions designed and used in other contexts. The CTRH, in particular, owes much to the South African TRC model and other African Commissions formed very much in its likeness.

This “wholesale importation” of a particular model from a very different context seems to have gone unquestioned. The South African TRC addressed a conflict that was largely a one-sided war of oppression. It had a secretariat of some 300, and an initial annual operational budget of USD 18 million. Even then, while its successes are not overlooked, it was an imperfect process and it has many critics. Other African versions of this model, including Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia and Kenya, offer worse examples of weak or failed Commissions.

The CTRH at this stage “would fail before it started, because there is no traction for it.” “No-one in government wants it.” But it is enshrined once again in the Revitalised ARCISS.

3 Concluding thoughts

Perhaps, as a TGoNU struggles to get on its feet, and the National Dialogue moves towards its climax of a national conference, COVID-19 permitting, an opportunity opens for some reflection on what exactly might best serve South Sudan now and in the future.

“First you have a dialogue to agree your vision of a future society. Then you work back to what you need to get there.” There is no agreed vision of a future South Sudanese society at peace with itself, though perhaps the National Dialogue has suggested some options for consideration. If a peaceful and sustainable future society could be envisioned (and that is a much bigger matter than just reconciliation), then perhaps one could work back from that to see what kind of reconciliation process could be tailored specifically for South Sudan to contribute to the establishment of such a future.

There are examples of other methods available elsewhere in Africa. Many South Sudanese politicians and religious leaders have made study-visits to Rwanda, and spoken of its moving, even transformational, significance. Yet the single biggest lesson to be learnt from the Rwandan experience of reconciliation was a refusal, in the face of considerable international pressure, to import the popular model, and rather to look inward to Rwandan culture and devise a national version of the traditional *gacaca* method of community conflict resolution. It was shaky and imperfect in its execution, but it largely worked, and had meaning to the population because it resonated widely with the culture. It was an example of “building modernity on tradition.”

South Sudanese culture, too, has its traditional methods and actors, though these have figured little in process design for reconciliation. Traditional methods of conflict management, of dispute resolution and of reconciliation after wrong-doing, which might well significantly add to the repertoire of tools available to reconciliation Initiatives, seem to have been largely side-lined by most of them, whether Church-led or politically-driven. This applies even more to actors who would have practiced those methods: chiefs, traditional leaders, witch-doctors. Some of these ideas, indeed, were in the original CPA:

the Council of the States and the Councils of Traditional Authority Leaders (COTALs), for example. But since 2013, the pattern has mostly been to see others as threats to one’s Initiative, rather than complements (see 7), and the traditional constituency, along with most of its methodology, has been excluded.

No reconciliation institution will come cheaply or easily. But large-scale Commissions and the like bring huge issues of resources and logistics for a context like South Sudan. At the moment, a CTRH “would be a logistical impossibility.” All the more reason to reflect on what the current reality is, and what its constraints on capacity are, and work out a realistic path to the future that is manageable in its scale and meaningful in its method.

The overall conclusion of the Initiatives under review is this: there is no need to apply the formula once again. It has been attempted enough times. Its last incarnation, the National Dialogue, had a difficult beginning and continuance, but it seems to have recovered enough credibility to be accepted now as the last in the series, producing a well-documented wealth of broad issues, grievances and suggestions about the future of South Sudan. With local and regional dialogues complete, it remains for a national event to bring it to a close.

3.1 Guiding questions to take a conversation forward

The question for South Sudan regarding reconciliation then becomes: How can all these years of effort be built on? How can we move on from it, not repeating it, but designing a next phase of something different that builds on it?

Conversations should begin as soon as possible between as many of the South Sudanese actors and stakeholders as wish to build on past experience and results to co-operate in generating a new, more comprehensive vision of what a reconciled South Sudan would look like, and how best to move from here to there. That would mean creating a roadmap, a realistic process to move together through reconciliation.

What is required is absolutely not yet another new Initiative to steer future reconciliation. What is essential at this juncture is simply that stakeholders should have these conversations with each other, to build a vision of how best they can co-ordinate their complementary responsibilities and roles toward a shared goal. There are some simple lessons from the preceding review that might in turn stimulate some initial questions to start those discussions:

1	Learning	A methodology has proved useful and sustainable.
	Question	<i>Has it gone as far as it can? How do we move on from it?</i>

2	Learning	There has been a confusion between preparing for, and actually doing, reconciliation. There has also been a lack of clarity on basic concepts, and on what is – and what is not – reconciliation.
	Question	<i>How can we create a comprehensive South Sudanese definition of reconciliation?</i>

3	Learning	There has been rivalry over who owns reconciliation.
	Question	<i>Can we identify the various forms of reconciliation needed in South Sudan?</i>
4	Learning	There have been too many attempts at one-off quick fixes, and many longer-term processes have been halted by circumstances.
	Question	<i>How can we envision a sustainable process of reconciliation?</i>
5	Learning	Reconciliation, like everything else in a conflict context, is highly political.
	Question	<i>What specific roles in the reconciliation process are for government, for the churches, for civil society, for other sectors?</i>
6	Learning	There have been interagency competition and intra-agency tensions.
	Question	<i>How can we envisage an overall process in which all the necessary sectors can function in complement to each other and in co-operative manner?</i>
7	Learning	Violent conflict and insecurity have deeply undermined reconciliation initiatives.
	Question	<i>How can we ensure a stable environment for a reconciliation process?</i>
8	Learning	Donor/international support to reconciliation has been inconsistent, and donor-partner relations have generated high tensions.
	Question	<i>Can South Sudan draw together a coherent plan with clear and realistic priorities? Can the donor community combine in a co-operative platform to support this plan with adaptability and sensitivity?</i>
9	Learning	Imported grand structures may be unsuitable or unworkable in South Sudan.
	Question	<i>How can South Sudan create a vision of a broad process for multi-dimensional reconciliation, that resonates primarily with South Sudanese culture, plays to its strengths, and combines tradition with innovation?</i>

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