



South Sudan

**Peacebuilding Opportunities Fund (POF)**

# **Learning towards a national agenda for reconciliation**

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Tensions to manage moving forward

Version 1 – 07/11/2020

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## 1 Introduction

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

A June 2020 Review of previous national level reconciliation initiatives identified recurring trends and patterns. The POF National Expert Advisory Network discussed the Review in the light of next steps, “*looking back in order to create forward momentum,*” and there followed a range of conversations with other actors within and outside South Sudan.

This paper draws on the issues raised in those discussions and identifies tensions to be managed in developing and implementing reconciliation and peacebuilding initiatives. It is not written as the conclusion of a discussion, but a contribution to an ongoing conversation that can lead to concrete next steps.

As before, “double quotation marks” indicate direct quotes from these consultations.

We are dealing here with a complex context with complex tensions. Some of them are not resolvable through a binary choice between opposites. They are abiding, long-term tensions that require adaptive, iterative management along a spectrum of options between two poles, depending on shifting circumstances. With ongoing monitoring, these tensions can be managed to produce effective outcomes. This paper discusses four such tensions:

- **'Ad hoc' and Coherence:** clarity of process and complexity of approach;
- **Now and Later:** what can/must be done now and what can/must wait for changes in context;
- **Local and National:** local/community processes and national initiatives;
- **Internal and External:** the roles of, and relations between, internal and external actors.

This paper does not prescribe solutions, but offers preliminary ‘scaffolding’ for building initiatives for peace. While the process which has produced this paper grew from a

narrow focus on reconciliation, much of what follows is pertinent to the broader field of peacebuilding.

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## 2 ‘Ad hoc’ and Coherence

Criticism of early reconciliation initiatives centred around their ad hoc nature: they were either short-term, even one-off processes, or they tried to address a single definition of reconciliation through a single mechanism (allowing only one initiative at a time, and run by one set of actors) and often in a vacuum, disconnected from peacebuilding, justice, development, governance and other essential social processes.

These criticisms are valid, especially given the diversity of communities in South Sudan, their varying experiences of conflict and violence, and their differing needs for reconciliation. The alternative – a coherent social process where all the related elements are interlinked to reconciliation, and where multiple definitions of reconciliation can be employed by multiple actors – demands considerable complexity. Hence the tension.

At one end of the spectrum is “the sin of over-simplification,” which protects the clarity and manageability of the process, but limits its potential and its legitimacy from the start. At the other lies overwhelming complexity that is sensitive to the diversity of roles, needs and methods across the country, but risks increasing confusion and fuelling competition (over legitimacy, over resources, over status, etc.).

Coherence could come from “the creation of a shared, or national, vision” for a peaceful and stable South Sudan. Steps to achieve this vision could be identified and their implementation co-ordinated, and reconciliation more clearly designed while accommodating the necessary complexity. Different actors could identify their roles, and see where their efforts fit with the vision, and how they relate to the efforts of others. Different communities and sections of society could follow the processes most appropriate for them, for the outcomes most important to them, within a coherent landscape of parallel activities.

There is less consensus about how to create that vision. Some claim that “John Garang had such a vision,” and that it could be revisited for inspiration. Others believe that no clear vision existed before independence, beyond general ideas like secession, equality, dignity and freedom. Also, that since 2011, the focus has been on state-building (structures of governance) at the expense of nation-building (shared identity, building on commonalities while respecting differences, creating a shared vision of “who we want to be”). Some criticise the SPLM for not developing the shared vision ten years ago, while others believe the SPLM did hold such a vision “for an autonomous society, based on inclusivity and self-development,” but has lost sight of it in the fractious intervening time.

Some believe that only a government has the power to translate such a vision into reality (like Kagame in Rwanda, or Mandela’s ANC in South Africa). But the first step requires everyone, including civil society and local communities, to create and agree the shared national vision.

Creating a genuine shared national vision will clarify much of the work of peacebuilding and social rebuilding, but the process to achieve this is complex. In the current context, such a task might seem overwhelming. On the other hand, several people are agreed that it might be “an inspiring conversation to have”, creating a positive vision of the

future. This would be exceptional among most conversations on South Sudan's future, which tend to focus on problems and obstacles, and follow a negative current.

One possibility has been offered as a less ambitious starting point. If reconciliation – or peacebuilding in general – is indeed to be a “multi-actor, multi-initiative process,” involving civil society, communities, political leaders, churches, traditional actors and methods, perhaps a place to begin would be for those actors to agree a set of shared goals. These could form a framework within which specific initiatives could be placed. Actors could see their place in the bigger scheme, see how their efforts relate to those of others, agree standards by which to monitor progress, and share lessons. They would no longer be operating in an artificial “vacuum”, but more clearly reflecting the real social complexity of the context: “Maybe we could create one shared definition of reconciliation with multiple components – something to unite around.”

Discussions involved in agreeing, and then working towards, these shared goals could themselves become a reconciliation process of building trust, co-operation and mutual understanding. It might be a path to more effective co-operation while avoiding the competition and turf-wars that have dogged previous initiatives.

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### 3 Now and Later

Another tension surrounds the dilemma of beginning reconciliation while conflict remains unresolved. Urgency requires that “we cannot delay”. But lack of stability and security suggest that renewed or continuing political instability and violence could undermine such efforts. In the words of one commentator, “We have to fix the car while driving it.” Another speaks of “positive opportunists” who can identify an opening for action and build something positive around it to convince others of its viability.

But how can we know what can be done now, and what must wait for changes of circumstance? What can be done to create space for action? How to find the entry-points into a complex system?

To choose to do nothing is not a neutral decision: the context is always shifting, for better or worse (along the tension spectrums, and in other dimensions). But is it useful to identify a starting point where work can begin without being certain of all the final outcomes? In some complex systems the only certainty is of continual change, where unpredictability makes it difficult to maintain the linear logic of an evidence-based approach, so that requires continual readiness to adapt, learn and recalibrate – a kind of ongoing tension-management.

Experience around the world teaches that no peace processes are perfect, and that all reconciliation processes are to some degree compromised. Ideal reconciliation never happens. So to wait until all conflict is resolved before beginning to reconcile may well be to chase an impossible ideal (especially given that reconciliation itself will contribute to the broader conflict resolution process. But how to find the right moment on the spectrum of tension? Some commentators have asked whether a reconciliation process can be started in South Sudan that is just “good enough” to serve, despite flaws, or how to at least “make it real,” if not make it perfect.

Such people, who may perhaps be the “positive opportunists” mentioned above, seem to be looking at the deeply flawed political situation and ongoing outbreaks of violence, in

various regions, and ask two pragmatic questions: Are violence levels low enough at least to get started, in some areas if not all? Is there sufficient minimal coherent governance to get started?

If the answers are positive enough, then “we could work with what’s there, towards something with which people will be reasonably content.”

There is a growing consensus that reconciliation and peacebuilding will need a longer-term timeframe than previously thought. All the more reason to begin where possible, and when possible, as all efforts will be for the long-term. To wait until all risks and unknowns are eliminated might well be to not begin at all. At the centre, the main political conflict remains unresolved and casts a long shadow over all efforts for progress. But there have been positive steps towards functioning governance over the last year. Some commentators believe it possible to acknowledge unresolved differences without fighting over them. This would enable reconciliation to start while agreeing to resolve political differences later. One recent commentary<sup>1</sup> for example, has accepted that political leaders are still profoundly opposed to the creation of the Hybrid Court, but proposes that perhaps other R-ARCISS structures focused on reconciliation and reparation might be invigorated in the meanwhile. More generally, “the security agenda must be: we will agree to sort out our political differences, but meanwhile we must get on with reconciliation”.

There exists a concept of ‘political reconciliation’ (also known as ‘reconciliation for realists’) in which politicians learn to build the working relationships necessary for functioning democratic politics. They may not engage in interpersonal processes of forgiveness and apology, deep trust-building and healing, but they must build pragmatic and co-operative working relations to get things done. If former foes cannot yet trust each other, they could at least build an operating system that they can trust.

Sometimes, this tension expresses itself in a split between civil society and local communities on the one side, and central government on the other. Many non-governmental commentators have expressed their frustration, and one used the metaphor of “hardware and software”: government needs to provide the hardware – stability, security, the rule of law, functioning politics and governance – upon which a range of actors can operate the software of reconciliation, healing, accountability, justice, etc.

If non-government actors can produce a workable plan to start initial reconciliation and such ‘software programmes,’ they need only convince government of its feasibility in order to begin. Government simply needs to avoid putting obstacles in the way.

Proponents of this argument are not suggesting that government can shirk its responsibilities. Government needs to develop the hardware, and engage in the political reconciliation necessary to facilitate its development.

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<sup>1</sup> Kuyang Harriet Logo: *The Politics of Criminal Accountability and Peacebuilding in South Sudan*. LPI Bulletin, Aug-Sept 2020

## 4 Local and National

Initiatives at the local or community level have been ongoing, if sporadic, for a long time. They have developed either out of 'natural' local conflict management processes, often based on traditional values and norms, or from a belief that, in the vacuum at the national level, local initiatives, like the 'people to people' process, have a better chance of thriving and reaching a conclusion on the more intimate scale.

Recently, a growing consensus has emerged that local activities – in reconciliation, peacebuilding, conflict settlement, etc. – are worthy of more attention, including from external actors. These initiatives resonate more effectively in the local culture (perhaps partly because of the lack of shared vision and identity at the broader level) than in the fractured atmosphere of the centre. This chimes with recent comments about the need to revitalise and harness traditional (sometimes tribal) values, actors and processes in devising a national process of peacebuilding which combines “modernity built on tradition.”

However, there are roles that can only be effective at the national level. For example, only the state can officially sanction large-scale acknowledgement of suffering and criminality, establish national structures for truth-telling, apologies, accountability, and justice. These can also operate at sub-national levels, but only government holds authority or ultimate responsibility for national policy.

So both national and community levels have roles to play. But there is a tension between them, with scepticism and occasionally hostility on both sides. If reconciliation must apply at all levels, top to bottom, where best to start? Past reconciliation initiatives have been largely national initiatives with local components. Some say this is why they failed. But if part of the expressed aim of reconciliation and peacebuilding as a whole is to produce “a South Sudan at peace with itself” (not ten states at peace with themselves, or dozens of tribes, or thousands of autonomous communities), then the national dimension is crucial.

Nonetheless, questions arise that feed tensions. Will central government permit a national process which can run with its blessing, but without its interference? How far can a purely local process go to establish lasting ripple effects beyond the community involved? Who owns a national process, and who owns a local one? Which kinds of reconciliation process happen at each level, and which definitions of reconciliation apply? Is peaceful coexistence meaningful in the same way at the national and local levels? If “South Sudan society is based on consensus,” could a developing body of experience in consensus-based local practice be presented as a convincing argument for its use also at the centre?

Ownership of a reconciliation process in the past was a problem, in part depending on who its leaders were and whose interests they were perceived to serve. Consequently, many people now say the process must belong to “the people.” This requires some clarification and explanation as to how it can happen, but is a web of local initiatives a way to realise that ownership?

There also remains the difficult question of linking the national and local processes. Is there a middle ground, for example at state level, or more metaphorically through centre-periphery relationships? Is it possible, as one commentator says, to “accept for now that the head is dysfunctional, but the base is intact, and so begin in the middle”?

Another commentator asserts that positive experiences and successful outcomes of reconciliation are largely at the local or community level, and so proposes that the centre – civil society, for example – could be the place for the discussion of shared values and a framework of shared goals, and even the beginning of the national vision debate (see Section 1). Then the results of both could be married together. The goal would be a network of effective, decentralised peacebuilding initiatives, held together in a framework at a central level, which communicates horizontally across initiatives and, increasingly, vertically between initiatives and the centre. Illustrating successes and good practice, the growing coherence of the practice network would inform and strengthen the central framework.

As noted in Section 3, a government need only give its blessing for local activities and central discussions to take place. Could it “surrender ownership enough to let willing hands take it on?” If we view local processes as “the laboratory” where positive results are gradually amassed, with the centre providing coherence and a functioning framework, then gradually the national role would shift from ‘passive permission’ to ‘official support’. Might that describe a role for the Ministry of Peacebuilding, especially in the early stages, where government approval needs to be distinct from those personalised offices which have owned (and undermined) past initiatives?

Where might such ‘coherence’ be generated at the centre? One possibility is to “consolidate” the extensive information gathered from the National Dialogue into a strategic plan. As yet, the National Dialogue documentation exists as “raw material”, and mainly in the form of negative criticism. But it might provide the basis for “synthesising into more strategic form to generate a strategic plan, a plan for action, even the basis for a national vision”. This could be further developed by civil society groups in coordination with government: “We need to be in a state of permanent national dialogue for years to come. To be constantly questioning and consulting is normal.”

Currently, initiatives need independence from government to protect their legitimacy. As initiatives develop over time, they need access to and support from government in order to exert influence at the national level. This is not a problem particular to South Sudan, but rather a tension that must be managed in any democracy: how to manage civil society relationships with government. The organisation needs to balance its freedom to act with the degree of influence it needs, which stems from access to and approval from government.

The Churches have their own slightly different version of this tension, but it still involves a careful balancing act: “There are civic spaces for the Churches without the government. And there are some levels of engagement with the government.”

For now, a dysfunctional government is still the more problematic side of this equation. As this is resolved, and democratic governance including rule of law begins to emerge, then the tension will transform into freedom versus influence (on the non-governmental side) and legitimacy versus control (on the government side).

Reconciliation can start in the non-governmental sphere, but to reach its full potential it needs government buy-in and participation. There are arguments of self-interest to be made to government. Short-term: “their own security depends on an end to the violence”. Long-term: the capacity of the country to be governed – and therefore their success – depends on effective peacebuilding and reconciliation.

## 5 Internal and External

Tensions between local and national actors encompasses scepticism, suspicion and distrust in both directions. These tensions relate to previous reconciliation initiatives and whom they have included and excluded.

There is a parallel tension between internal and external actors. External actors (international NGOs and donors) have expended huge amounts of effort and money towards peacebuilding, and specifically reconciliation, in South Sudan. The results, as documented briefly in the previous Review, have not been impressive. In the process, relations between external and internal actors have become fraught and antagonistic. In part this stems from mutual misunderstanding.

On the international side, initial goodwill gave way to disillusionment with government and growing suspicion, which led to a withdrawal of support. Instead, donors looked for civil society or non-government agencies to support. But here similar tensions and suspicions also arose, mirroring the earlier ones. While internal actors scrambled for resources and took risks in an unstable and insecure environment, externals tended to impose their own context-blind working methods on their partners. “A European model will fail. It cannot fit the culture of South Sudan.”

There is no neat resolution to this tension. Both sides are essential to peacebuilding, and both have strengths and weaknesses.

But there is a recognition within South Sudan that the short-term quick fixes for reconciliation failed spectacularly. Indeed, some would blame the externals for perpetuating the “donor-driven mentality for a one-off quick-fix approach”. What is needed now are coherent, joined-up approaches with long-term timescales. “The same applies to donors and other international actors.” Funding models need to move away from large-scale multi-million projects to more targeted, holistic and long-term support. “The international community needs to shift focus to include the country outside Juba.” It needs to shape its support “as sustainable and long-term, as opposed to the wholesale importation of models” or donor methodologies. And these commentaries are not criticism from internal actors, but self-criticism from externals. “There are many international ‘old hands’ who have worked long-term in South Sudan, who know, how to build a co-operative South Sudan-centred methodology.

A key part of this particular tension is around legitimacy. Externals have difficulty establishing and safeguarding the legitimacy of potential partners. However, the definitions of legitimacy are the product of Western/Northern thinking and practice, further complicated by issues of accountability of donors to their domestic audiences. One result is an over-cautious policy that prevents good implementation on the ground.

It is possible to characterise this legitimacy dimension as a tension between the need for externals to trust the process against their tendency to be risk-averse. This reflects earlier comments about the challenges of operating in a complex system, and the need to be adaptive and iterative. For internal actors, it may be more a tension between ownership and estrangement: everyone consulted has spoken of the need for South Sudanese actors to have “ownership” of the peacebuilding process, and for But some external practice has been criticised for providing “transplant operations,” writing plans and documentation without prior and substantial conversations with the internals, which leaves internals feeling “estranged” from the process and disempowered within it.

The tension could also be characterised as one between a narrow technical and project-focused approach, at the expense of sufficient interaction between internals and externals at a strategic level.

For a more holistic approach to work, donors need to work more co-operatively to pool and more accurately target their support over the longer term. Meanwhile internal actors, in government or outside it need to be more joined-up in presenting a broad coalition to donors. In the case of reconciliation, “there will come a time in the future when we must evaluate our work as a nation, and this depends on the kinds of policies we have documented as our points of reference”.

Additionally, “major regional changes, especially in Sudan and Ethiopia, demand a new way of looking at South Sudan”. Such a new perspective is required not only from neighbouring countries, IGAD and the AU, but, by extension, also from the UN, the Troika and all other international donors, INGOs, and international business interests.

Huge complexity faces an external actor trying to identify entry-points for support. Reliance on “evidence-based planning” and a technical approach is unlikely to work, because they operate to simplify and de-complicate what is essentially, and permanently, complex: a diverse society in conflict. Risk-aversion can likewise be undermining. Perhaps more strategic thinking – including intensive external-internal strategic planning conversations – could be part of working out how to address the complexity in a more adaptive approach that provides room for the “positive opportunism” that the situation demands.

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## 6 Conclusion

The core argument of this paper is that it **is** possible to engage in meaningful peacebuilding and reconciliation activities in South Sudan, despite the many complexities and tensions. However, serious re-thinking is required to develop and design more strategic and context-sensitive approaches. Consideration of the tensions raised here, and devising methodologies to manage them that accurately reflect the complexities of the context and of action within it, will help. All actors, whatever their role, position and task, need to come together as “positive opportunists.”