Localisation and conflict sensitivity: Lessons on good practice from South Sudan

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There is still much to be understood about South Sudan's dynamic context. However, there is a wealth of existing research, knowledge, experience, and ongoing discussions around localisation in South Sudan. It is critical that the aid sector continues to prioritise spaces for deep reflection and open dialogue around what 'localisation' means in South Sudan, the obstacles, and opportunities it presents, and how to translate localisation commitments into good practice. While localisation does not automatically lead to more to conflict sensitive aid, working on localisation in a conflict sensitive way, with South Sudanese partners who are aware of and committed to conflict-sensitivity, certainly will contribute to it. This paper seeks to synthesise lessons on good practice in supporting conflict sensitive localisation, based on information and knowledge already available, and while it focuses primarily on lessons for humanitarians, its findings are also relevant for development and peacebuilding actors.

Introduction

This briefing paper explores the 'localisation' of aid in South Sudan through a conflict sensitivity lens. It synthesises existing research, considering what 'localisation' has meant in South Sudan and what constitutes a 'local'[2] actor. It focuses on the obstacles and opportunities present in South Sudan that relate to conflict sensitivity and localisation, including what this means for the aid sector and its interaction with conflict dynamics, and good practices and lessons learned from past approaches. Based on a review of 30 papers relevant to localisation, civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and conflict sensitivity in South Sudan and beyond, and discussions with staff from South Sudanese NGOs during two online roundtables in May and June 2021, the paper provides recommendations to donors, international organisations, and South Sudanese organisations on how to translate localisation commitments into good practice.[3] While the focus is on localisation and humanitarian interventions, the lessons and recommendations are also relevant for development and peacebuilding interventions.

A transformative approach to localisation has great potential to enhance the conflict sensitivity of aid. This could inform programming that is more contextually informed and conflict-aware, that builds on existing capacities and is embedded within a longer-term vision for change in South Sudan. Yet, this depends on *how* localisation is interpreted and enacted. A shallow, short-term approach to localisation, that primarily takes the form of sub-contracting individual South Sudanese NGOs on projects they have had a limited role in designing, will achieve little in terms of conflict sensitivity, and will likely further the transfer of financial, security and reputational risks to South Sudanese partners.

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[1] The Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility's (CSRF) Better Aid Forum (BAF) is a series of events and discussions with different stakeholders to consider the long-term objectives and ambitions of the aid sector in South Sudan. The CSRF commissioned a number of papers that consider key issues in South Sudan that play a role in shaping how aid is conceptualised and delivered in South Sudan'. This BAF Briefing paper on localisation is the first in the BAF Briefing Paper series that will also look at gender and revisit the 'Aiding the Peace' multi-donor evaluation that was conducted in 2010.

[2] In the South Sudan civil society typology, 'national' NGOs are those that work in multiple states and often engage with the international aid sector at the Juba level. 'Local' NGOs and other civil society organisations tend to work within their communities or cover a limited geographic area. They also engage with the international aid sector, but mainly at the state, county, or community level. Organisations are often identified as either a national NGO or a local NGO or CBO based on their registration status with the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC). Much of the research currently available does not distinguish between these different levels.

[3] There were 15 participants in total: nine at the first roundtable and six at the second. Participants came from organisations based in Aweil, Bentiu, Bor, Juba, Malakal and Wau. The second roundtable was specifically for women-led organisations. This paper has benefited from the exceptionally helpful suggestions and comments of participants at these workshops, as well as from the thoughts and suggestions of the CSRF team and of participants at an earlier Better Aid Forum (BAF) roundtable on localisation, and from a review by Malish John Peter of the Institute of Social Policy and Research (ISPR).

A conflict sensitive approach to localisation in South Sudan would require, firstly, engaging a broader range of local actors, with a specific focus on the inclusion of marginalised groups; secondly, reflecting on how international support may influence dynamics within South Sudanese civil society, and how to ensure this strengthens – rather than undermines – civic space and the broader civil society ecosystem;[4] and, thirdly, prioritising the *quality* of support to South Sudanese partners, including equitable access to overheads and longer-term funding, enabling them, in turn, to work in conflict sensitive ways. It means rethinking interpretations of 'capacity' – to better value and build on existing strengths, and promote accountability to communities, not just to donors. Finally, realising the potential benefits of localisation to conflict-sensitive aid means ensuring South Sudanese partners have far greater control over the projects they are involved in implementing, including the time, space and support to design programmes that sustainably respond to longer-term issues in their communities.

What is 'localisation', and what has it meant in South Sudan?

'Localisation' is used to refer to a wide range of practices, from sub-contracting aid delivery to local and national partners, to the development of locally specific response models.[5] One widely used definition describes localisation as 'an umbrella term referring to all approaches to working with local actors', differentiating this from locally-led, which refers 'specifically to work that originates with local actors, or is designed to support locally emerging initiatives'.[6] Under this definition, truly locally-led partnerships are rare in the humanitarian system.[7]

The term 'localisation' gained momentum in the run-up to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit. Pressure for change was driven, in part, by mobilisations among local and national NGOs and activists in the Global South, and their allies, who critiqued the highly unequal distribution of power and resources in the international humanitarian system; and by consultations in advance of the Summit with 23,000 people that highlighted calls for 'a fundamental change in the humanitarian enterprise'.[8] Other drivers included assessments that found that a greater role for local and national actors would improve the reach, quality and cost effectiveness of humanitarian response.[9] 'Localisation' is often associated with commitments made through the resulting 'Grand Bargain', which was launched at the Summit, including to channel 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national actors 'as directly as possible' and to increase multi-year investments in their institutional capacities.[10]

Globally, progress on these commitments has been limited, with the proportion of direct funding channelled to local and national actors (including governments) fluctuating from 2.8% in 2016, to 3.6% in 2018 and 3.1% in 2020.[11] Progress is uneven across countries, with higher percentages of funding going to national actors in contexts where national governments play a large role in

[4] Amongst other things, this requires strengthening the broader ecosystem of civil society, rather than just specific organisations, understanding and challenging the shrinking of civic space, and supporting space for learning, coordination, and collective action between civil society organisations. For learning on this in other contexts, see Stephen M, Martini A (2020), 'Turning the Tables: Insights from Locally-Led Humanitarian Partnerships in Conflict Situations', Saferworld and Save the Children Sweden.

[5] Wall I, Hedlund K (2016), 'Localisation and Locally-Led Crisis Response: A Literature Review', Local to Global Protection, May.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Stephen M, Martini A (2020), 'Turning the Tables: Insights from Locally-Led Humanitarian Partnerships in Conflict Situations', Saferworld and Save the Children Sweden.

[8] WHS Secretariat (2015), 'Restoring Humanity: Synthesis of the Consultation Process for the World Humanitarian Summit', United Nations, September.

[9] Barbelet V, Davies G, Flint J, Davey E (2020), 'Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localisation: a literature study.' Humanitarian Practice Group (HPG), June; as well as reports from the various consultations in advance of the World Humanitarian Summit.

[10] See https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain

[11] Development Initiatives (2021), 'Funding for Effectiveness and Efficiency. Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2021: Chapter 4'.

humanitarian action, such as Jordan and Lebanon, but overall there is no clear upward trend in direct funding to local and national humanitarian actors.[12] Ambiguity around the term 'localisation' allows international organisations to tout progress through limited, piecemeal changes; this has 'diluted the meaning of 'localisation' and obscured the radical implications it could have for the aid system'.[13] Some now argue against using the term, contending that it refers to a technocratic exercise that detracts from necessary structural change in the aid system.[14]

In South Sudan, the international humanitarian system has been a significant and powerful presence for upwards of three decades and has significantly shaped the South Sudanese NGO landscape. Recently, South Sudan has been a focus country for research and initiatives on 'localisation' and rhetoric around 'localisation' is growing. Overall, however, progress in South Sudan in relation to the Grand Bargain's target of 25% of funding going to local and national responders has been limited. In 2019, 2.4% of total reported humanitarian funding in South Sudan was channelled directly to local and national actors, including pooled funding.[15] South Sudanese NGOs receive most of their funding through sub-contracting arrangements with UN agencies and international NGOs (INGOs), but this is not tracked systematically, making monitoring difficult. One study estimated the combined total of direct and indirect funding to national NGOs (NNGOs) in South Sudan was around 4.9% of tracked humanitarian funding in 2017.[16]

What is 'local' in South Sudan?

Much of the debate around localisation seeks to determine which South Sudanese actors the term refers to. Recent research in South Sudan concluded that 'the most important and commonly held attribute of a local actor was that they had emerged from the grassroots, and so understood the local context, norms, and culture'.[17] The report suggests a much wider definition of 'local actor' than local or national NGOs connected to international actors.[18] Other commentators have called for a more nuanced understanding of local as a contextual and relational concept, drawing attention to 'who claims to represent the local, who defines who the local is, and how this may lead to the marginalisation of certain actors in the humanitarian arena'.[19]

Discourses on localisation in South Sudan typically focus on more 'professionalised' NNGOs with connections to international organisations. Yet, the country has an extensive, diverse civil society, including women's associations, academic institutions, youth groups, religious institutions, cooperatives, students and trade unions, savings groups, livelihood-based groups, and an array of other community-based actors. Communities across South Sudan also have strong norms and practices of sharing and providing mutual support, as well as systems for supporting the most vulnerable.[20] These systems and practices have proved central to how people survive crises and have

[12] Els C, Fröjmark H (2021), 'Local funding flows and leadership: recent trends in 10 major humanitarian responses', Overseas Development Institute (ODI)/ Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN), May.

[13] Saferworld and Save the Children (2020), 'Turning the Tables: Research Briefing'.

[14] Peace Direct, Adeso, the Alliance for Peacebuilding, Women of Color Advancing Peace and Security (2021), 'Time to Decolonise Aid: Insights and Lessons from a Global Consultation', May.

[15] Els C, Frojmark H, Carstensen N (2020), 'Localisation in Numbers – Funding Flows and Local Leadership in South Sudan', November.

[16] Ali M, et al. (2018), 'Funding to Local Humanitarian Actors: South Sudan Case Study', HPG/NEAR/ODI, October.

[17] Kiewied T, Soremekun O, Jok JM (2020), 'Towards Principled Humanitarian Action in Conflict Contexts: Understanding the Role of Partnerships. Voices from Nigeria and South Sudan', Caritas Norway, DanChurchAid, Kindernothilfe, Norwegian Church Aid and Dutch Relief Alliance, December.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Roepstorff K (2020), 'A Call for Critical Reflection on the Localisation Agenda in Humanitarian Action', *Third World Quarterly* **41**(2), pp 284-301.

[20] Santschi M, Gworo R, White E (2018), 'Caught Between Two Cultures: When Aid in South Sudan is Pulled between Local Norms and Western Systems', Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF), November.

a far more significant bearing on most people's lives than external aid; though they have been heavily strained by conflict, economic and climate-related crises.[21]

Over the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of national and local NGOs in South Sudan, involving diverse organisations with varied sizes, geographic roots, histories, and networks, and different areas of focus and expertise. Some are closely rooted in particular geographic areas or identity groups; others are trying to build an explicitly diverse, national identity both within their workforce and in terms of where they work. As such, it is difficult to generalise across these organisations and the below analysis must be read with that in mind.

What opportunities does 'localisation' offer for conflict sensitive aid?

Conflict sensitivity requires deep contextual knowledge, including an understanding of the drivers and dynamics of conflict, and of how aid might either fuel conflict or contribute to peace. It exists on a spectrum – from reducing risks and avoiding harm, to directly and deliberately addressing the drivers of conflict.[22] Attention to conflict sensitivity is essential in South Sudan, where there is a very real risk (and history) of aid fuelling conflict, and where 'contextual knowledge' demands an understanding of complex, interrelated local and national dynamics. This section identifies four ways in which a locally led humanitarian response can help to enhance the conflict sensitivity of aid.

Promoting a 'peace-integrated' approach

Over the years, there have been many calls to better integrate development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding activities ('the Triple Nexus') in South Sudan, in order to improve the effectiveness, coherence and conflict sensitivity of aid.[23] Many national and local actors already work across these divides, as they seek to respond to the varied and interconnected needs of communities they work with and to address longer-term issues. Similarly, many South Sudanese NGOs already 'consider a peace-integrated approach as an obvious and pragmatic choice'.[24] Some see working and advocating for peace and social change as an inherent part of their mission – even if, based on the scale of humanitarian needs and the availability of funding, emergency relief work is the core of their day-to-day activities.

For example, one study focusing on women's organisations in Juba showed that many already combine humanitarian action with development programmes dealing with women's economic empowerment and rights awareness and peace-building processes.[25] For these organisations, a strategic gender justice lens 'connects the immediate needs of women in crisis with an awareness of their continuing development needs', leading to a longer-term, comprehensive approach.[26] A study drawing on research in Unity, Upper Nile and Juba found that most local and national NGOs were not working exclusively on humanitarian activities but also sought to address issues related to social and

[21] Ibid.; see also Humphrey A, Krishnan V, and Krystalli R (2019), 'The Currency of Connections: Why Local Support Systems Are Integral to Helping People Recover in South Sudan', Mercy Corps, January.

[22] Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (2017), 'Contextualised Conflict Sensitivity Guidance for South Sudan', November (https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/contextualised-conflict-sensitivity-guidance-south-sudan/)

[23] Schmidlin N (2020), 'Untying the Nexus 'knot' in South Sudan', Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, November (https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/blog/untying-the-nexus-knot-in-south-sudan/)

[24] Quack M, Südhoff R (2020), 'Triple Nexus in South Sudan: Learning from Local Opportunities', Centre for Humanitarian Action, October (https://martin-quack.de/application/files/8416/0508/4139/Quack_Suedhoff_2020._Triple_Nexus_South_Sudan.pdf)

[25] Jayasinghe N, Khatun M, Okwii M (2020), 'Women Leading Locally: Exploring Women's Leadership in Humanitarian Action in Bangladesh and South Sudan', Oxfam, January (https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/women-leading-locally-exploring-womens-leadership-in-humanitarian-action-in-ban-620937/)

[26] Ibid.

economic development and conflict resolution;[27] similar findings emerged from research in Juba, Kapoeta and Bor.[28]

As local actors have become more professionalised in order to access international funding, they have increasingly had to work within specific sectors and siloes, although they may continue to navigate ways to work across these divides using short-term funding from multiple donors.[29] Some maintain peacebuilding, cultural and other activities voluntarily while implementing emergency focused projects with donor funding. However, evidence of the impact this has had on locally-driven integration of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities is limited, and more research is needed to build the evidence base around this and ensure that more holistic, locally-led responses are not being undermined.

Leveraging proximity and contextual knowledge

Conflict-sensitive aid in South Sudan requires a detailed understanding of the context, including local cultures, behaviours and practices, the key stakeholders and gatekeepers and the power dynamics in a particular area. In addition, it is necessary to understand and assess the potential for conflict within one's own organisation and how this might interact with the wider context. Ultimately, this kind of contextual knowledge can help organisations to foresee how aid might either exacerbate conflict dynamics or contribute to peace, at both the level of specific projects and the wider humanitarian system.

Close connections with, proximity to and a long-term presence in communities, often predating particular crises, is seen as a key advantage for local NGOs in South Sudan, facilitating the development of networks and relationships, allowing organisations to build credibility and trust, and contributing to the sustainability of aid.[30] Proximity has different dimensions: for example, it can be geographic, social, religious, linguistic or temporal.[31] Research in South Sudan has highlighted the importance of historical connection as well as physical proximity for an actor to be considered 'local'.[32] Churches and faith-based groups, for example, may benefit from lower staff turnover and long-term commitment to their communities, as well as greater reach into more remote and volatile areas.[33]

One report emphasised that a key contribution of local actors in South Sudan to the Triple Nexus approach 'stems from their understanding of local contexts and their proximity to local communities, as well as the sustainability of their operations thanks to their commitment to their surroundings'.[34] Proximity and long-term presence also allow for a deeper understanding of the interrelated issues facing communities, representing an opportunity to respond in a more relevant and holistic way.[35] However, this is not automatic but varies across organisations, and can be undermined by short-term funding cycles and the 'projectisation' of assistance, which forces organisations to fluctuate between different locations as funding comes and goes.

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[27] Kiewied, Soremekun, Jok, (2020) op cit.

[28] Wilkinson O, de Wolf F, Alier M (2019), 'The Triple Nexus and Local Faith Actors in South Sudan: Findings from Primary Research', ACT Alliance and DanChurchAid, October (https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/triplenexus_southsudan.pdf)

[29] Ibid.

[30] Howe K, Munive J, Rosenstock K (2019), 'Views from the Ground: Perspectives on Localization in the Horn of Africa', Feinstein International Center, Tufts University and Save the Children Denmark, July; Tanner L, Moro L (2016), 'Missed Out: The Role of Local Actors in the Humanitarian Response in the South Sudan Conflict', CAFOD, Trócaire, Christian Aid, Oxfam GB and Tearfund, April.

[31] Howe et al., op cit.

[32] Kiewied, Soremekun, Jok, op cit.

[33] Tanner, Moro, op cit.

[34] Wilkinson, de Wolf, Alier, op cit.

[35] Ibid.

Maintaining and expanding the reach of the humanitarian response

One of the reasons often given for working with local actors in conflict settings, including South Sudan, is their ability to reach people in need of assistance, particularly those living in remote rural areas, territories where non-state armed actors operate or where there is greater instability. From a conflict sensitivity perspective, maintaining a presence when international actors withdraw can enable continuity of access to aid, and sustained contextual knowledge and relationships. Sustained relationships and expanded access can help contribute to peace, reach excluded or marginalised communities and lessen the likelihood of communities resorting to risky or violent measures to secure resources.

After the outbreak of conflict in December 2013, some South Sudanese NGOs were able to access areas worst affected, helping to maintain and expand the reach of the humanitarian response, and grew very quickly as a result of their increased role and funding available to them.[36] A key reason for this was that local actors stayed when international organisations withdrew, or they moved with people who had been displaced, risking their own safety to continue delivering assistance and report needs to other humanitarian actors.[37] Yet, this also led to an increased sense of fear and abandonment amongst local actors, with diminishing trust in some cases. South Sudanese NGOs continue to play a crucial role in enhancing the coverage of the humanitarian response, particularly as international organisations have become increasingly risk-averse.[38] They often provide 'last mile' services and work in some of the hardest-to-reach areas, including remote areas and those seen as higher risk.[39] As one study notes, 'in many instances, there would be no humanitarian response without the work of local organisations'.[40]

However, access varies across locations, organisations, and over time. The narrative that local actors have innately better access may lead to pressure on them to take greater risks and operate with reduced security costs, or to assumptions which are not contextually specific. 'Access' is often conflated with willingness to accept risk,[41] and South Sudanese actors are often expected to absorb substantive risk with limited financial or other support to manage it, which can negatively impact on their ability to meet their 'duty of care' obligations to their staff.[42] The pressure on L/NNGOs to be low cost can increase security risks, as the lack of access to flexible funding or unrestricted funding for assets and core costs makes it difficult for them to properly resource staff safety and other risk and security management requirements.[43] Another, critical, question is who within an organisation is taking the risks: if some national NGOs stake their reputation on their ability to stay when others leave, what kind of pressures can this place on their frontline staff, and how much say do these staff have in the matter?[44] Ultimately, as cautioned in a key report, generalisations about access 'obscure the operational- and context-specific factors associated with reaching and sustaining delivery to people in need, [and] devalue the types of risks organisations undertake'.[45]

[36] Moro L, Pendle N, Robinson A, Tanner L (2020), 'Localising Humanitarian Aid during Armed Conflict: Learning from the histories and creativity of South Sudanese NGOs', London School of Economics and Political Science, March.
[37] Tanner and Moro, op cit.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Hamsik L (2019), 'NGOs & Risk: Managing Uncertainty in Local-International Partnerships. Case Studies: Northeast Nigeria & South Sudan', Interaction and Humanitarian Outcomes, March.
[40] Howe, Munive, and Rosenstock, op cit.
[41] Hamsik, op cit.
[42] Morris R, Midgley T (2019), 'Strengthening Institutional Capacity to Adopt Conflict-Sensitive Approaches: Five Lessons from the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility in South Sudan, 2016-2018', Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, September.
[43] Hamsik, op cit.
[44] For international organisations 'duty of care' in South Sudan has often meant that staff (including 'relocatable' national staff) are withdrawn from or are prevented from travelling to locations that are deemed too insecure. Staff can also ask to leave or not travel to locations they feel are too insecure.
[45] Ibid.

Moving towards more participatory, locally owned approaches

Finally, a key benefit of localisation is the potential for more locally led participatory and consultative approaches that could mitigate the risk of doing harm and maximise potential positive impacts on the drivers of conflict. Yet, this is not automatic, and there are numerous barriers and structural disincentives to working in this way.

One element is the importance of engaging local stakeholders in designing interventions from the outset to help identify and mitigate potential conflict-sensitivity risks. Roundtable participants emphasised that a failure to understand the local context, values, and support mechanisms, or to have inclusive consultations, risks interventions being rejected or, worse, causing divisions within and between communities – directly conflicting with the principle to 'do no harm'. In the words of one participant, there is a grave risk of 'harming people who were trying to co-exist together…the social fabric within the community can be destroyed or damaged, because of your intervention.' Mitigating this requires organisations to take the time needed to plan, build relationships, have consultations that draw from a wide cross-section of community members and organisations, communicate regularly and openly with communities, conduct regular conflict and context analyses to build a deep understanding of the context, and be willing to stay and monitor and adapt their interventions as needed.[46]

Local and national organisations may be better placed to ensure an inclusive and participatory approach that is, in turn, more conflict sensitive. This was reflected in roundtable discussions, and in existing studies. One study noted that, for many local and national NGOs in South Sudan, involving different segments of the community in a participatory fashion was important for ensuring their response was appropriate and principled.[47] Another notes that failing to involve local and national actors in the design and leadership of aid could limit opportunities for INGOs to deepen their '…awareness of the local contexts where they are looking to work and design projects that are aligned with broader peacebuilding efforts in target communities'.[48]

Meaningful localisation is that which enables local actors to better include and respond to the needs and priorities of the communities they work with. This requires flexible, responsive, and, where possible, multi-year funding, coupled with a longer-term commitment by international actors to working in true partnership with local actors as equals, valued for the skills, contextual knowledge, and community relationships they bring, rather than as implementors of interventions identified and designed by others. For humanitarians who work with shorter funding timeframes, it is perhaps the last point that is both most critical, and the most challenging. In the words of one participant, true localisation is that which 'offers more space for the community to think of their own ways to transform conflict into peace'.[49]

> ### Local Ownership
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> 'There is no need of advocating for funding to be brought into South Sudan if we don't want to change anything… with us local, we know that if we use a local context, and we include them in the designing of the project, they can come up with their approaches and the methods of mitigating this conflict within their areas… [But] the ownership of the project is not given to the community, it is always just designed and bought.'
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> *Source: Roundtable participant, 17 June 2021*

Barriers to meaningful localisation include donors' short funding timelines for humanitarian projects, the lack of funding available to L/NNGOs for travel, community engagement, analysis, and other incidental costs at the project design and proposal development stages, limited opportunities for South Sudanese organisations to influence or participate in the design and implementation of projects (including conflict analyses), and the inconsistent capacity amongst L/NNGOs to conduct and

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[46] Roundtable, 17 May 2021
[47] Howe, Munive, and Rosenstock, op cit.
[48] Morris and Midgley, op cit.
[49] Roundtable participant, 17 June 2021

communicate their own needs assessments and context analyses in ways that are accepted by international organisations. This has led to the tendency for international organisations to repeat their own analysis processes, placing increased burdens on communities to respond to repeated needs assessments, and to dominate multi-sector or multi-agency processes.

What challenges and obstacles most impact the progress of conflict-sensitive localisation?

Whether or not localisation is conflict sensitive or contributes to conflict-sensitive aid depends on how it is understood and implemented. Where localisation takes the form of prescriptive, short-term sub-contracting approaches, South Sudanese NGOs have less space to identify and have their work address longer-term, root causes of conflict. When localisation is seen as a 'cost-cutting' measure, with operational and administrative costs not fully covered, the financial, reputational, and security risks will be absorbed disproportionately by local and national NGOs and their frontline staff. Meanwhile, national, or local NGOs may lack the time and resources needed to analyse and monitor conflict dynamics, which is critical for adapting and responding to conflict drivers as needed. If a 'tick-box' approach to localisation dominates, we are unlikely to see the long-term, sustained relationship- and trust-building essential to building effective, equitable partnerships.

Finally, efforts to localise aid require an intersectional approach, with careful attention to who is included and excluded. Organisations led by women, youth, and people with disabilities, those based outside Juba and other large urban centres, or organisations well rooted in their communities but with limited experience of engaging with the international aid system, are often overlooked and struggle to attract funding or support from larger national or international actors.

Exacerbating inequalities

The introduction and distribution of aid is invariably political, with the potential to create winners and losers and shift power dynamics in ways that can exacerbate or help to address conflict dynamics.[50] Localisation is no different: the distribution of funding between organisations is fraught, complicated by high competition, limited resources, the centralisation of the humanitarian system in Juba, and a lack of transparency in decision-making. International agencies and donors should be aware that who they choose to fund, how, and where, has political consequences and impacts on the shape, diversity, and balance of power in civil society, and consequently its ability to contribute to a peaceful society. 'Localisation' that only benefits organisations closest to the centres of economic and political power risks intensifying existing inequalities and grievances, while missing opportunities to support the many local actors who are well-placed to leverage aid in ways that contribute to peace and social cohesion.

Geographic inequalities and rural-urban divides

Various reports point out that funding for South Sudanese NGOs is concentrated in a relatively small group of well-known, Juba-based organisations.[51] The humanitarian funding system privileges those in Juba with strong English skills and prior experience in the aid system who know how to navigate and speak the 'language' of international aid and can easily access information about funding and other opportunities. Except for some INGOs (often faith-based or more explicitly partnership-focused), most UN agencies and INGOs partner with a 'small subset of "preferred" [local] L/NNGOs',[52] partly due to risk aversion and Juba as the centre of humanitarian decision-making, as well as high barriers to receiving funding and stringent donor requirements. Meanwhile, smaller, and sub-nationally based organisations, as well as those less well-connected to or less well-versed in the language and practices of the international system, struggle to access international resources and support.

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[50] Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (2017) op cit.
[51] See e.g., Kiewied, Soremekun, Jok (2020) op cit.; Ali M, et al (2018) op cit.
[52] Hamsik, op cit.

This fuels a sense of marginalisation and alienation among non-Juba based organisations and incentivises organisations to invest in maintaining a presence in Juba, at the expense of their presence in other locations. This in turn replicates existing centre-periphery dynamics, with resources and opportunities concentrated in the capital and, to a lesser degree, other larger towns.[53] Some organisations have started to address this, with programmes working specifically with smaller, women-led organisations, for example, but the trend is still towards supporting successful Juba-based organisations that most closely resemble INGOs.

This was a key issue raised by roundtable participants, particularly those from smaller, women-led organisations based outside Juba. The director of an organisation in Jonglei State argued, for example, that information about funding is centralised in Juba, while women-led organisations at the grassroots are left out. National and international NGOs get funding from Juba to implement projects in Jonglei, but don't collaborate with grassroots actors, and at the end, 'you will find the project is implemented, they are going back… we are left there.'[54]

Other participants noted the potential for conflict when locally based organisations are side-lined. In one example, an international organisation had selected an NNGO to work in a new area, over a locally based organisation. This led to tension and ultimately prevented the project from being implemented in the area; the participant described this as being 'because they ignored the local organisation that had been there, and had been with the community, and had been really suffering voluntarily doing that. And here you come with the funding and give it to another organisation that had not even been there…it brought a very big conflict'.[55]

This is not an argument to reduce funding to NNGOs. Amounts of funding to South Sudanese NGOs (local or national) are dwarfed by the significant sums that go to UN agencies and, to a lesser extent, international NGOs. Plus, diversity in civil society is a strength. Some NNGOs, for example, are explicitly seeking to bring people together around a national vision and imagination, both in terms of how and where in the country they work, and in the diversity of their own staff. There is a need to increase the overall pot of funding for South Sudanese organisations, to consider how to make funding applications and decision-making processes more transparent and accessible, and to proactively reach out to a much wider range of local actors, including women and youth associations and other groups impacted by marginalisation and with distinct experiences of conflict.

> **Women-led NGOs' experience**
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> 'There is a lot of funding coming to South Sudan, and with that money, they are using localisation as a way of getting funding, but they are not localising it. How does that make sense? …localisation is being seen as a song, but it is not being seen as an impact…It is becoming like singing that Jonglei State is having a conflict or other state in South Sudan are having conflict as a way of getting funding. That is how we are seeing it as [a] local…It is a way of getting resources and making others rich instead of empowering the community.'
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> *Source: Roundtable participant, women-led NNGO, June 17, 2021*

Homogenising civil society

A related issue is that the way international organisations have supported local actors in South Sudan has tended to promote and expand organisations in their own image: organisations that resemble and operate similarly to INGOs. While this has facilitated the growth and professionalisation of the South Sudanese NGO sector, other local civil society actors that do not neatly fit the expectations of

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[53] Moro et al., op cit..
[54] Roundtable, 17 June 2021

[55] Roundtable, 17 June 2021

international organisations, including community-based organisations with strong grassroots constituencies, struggle to access financial support for their activities.[56]

This risks a homogenisation of civil society that is inherently exclusionary. As argued in a recent blog, 'a social movement, youth association, union, women's cooperative or coalition won't all look the same and may not be structured like a Western NGO, but that doesn't devalue their impact…yet many INGOs continue to want to "NGOise civil society" without understanding the harm they are doing in the process.'[57] This undermines the diversity of civil society, while missing opportunities to learn from and support more diverse local efforts and initiatives, and could further marginalise already marginalised groups.

One roundtable participant phrased this as the need to involve 'humanitarian activists' who already operate at the frontlines of humanitarian relief, noting that 'this category of people may not have undergone conventional kind of education, but they are very, very important, because of their knowledge about the area they operate in.'[58] He emphasised the need to better involve local actors beyond NGOs, including youth groups, unions, community associations, faith leaders, women's groups and others in humanitarian advocacy and delivery.

<u>Gendered inequalities</u>

Related to the above is the potential for women-led organisations to be side-lined. South Sudanese women have made critical contributions to national peace processes, despite many obstacles,[59] and there are grassroots women's organisations across the country working to organise and mobilise for peace, bridge divides, and provide practical support to people affected by conflict.[60] South Sudanese women and women-led organisations bring specific opportunities for peacebuilding, including experience, skills and knowledge gleaned from their roles in resolving past conflicts. They also have an intimate understanding of the distinctive ways in which women and children are impacted by war, as well as the role women can play in supporting violence or conflict (i.e. encouraging or celebrating young men engaging in cattle raiding through songs).[61] Women's leadership in humanitarian action matters intrinsically; there is also evidence that this can lead to more positive and inclusive outcomes, and can ensure humanitarian action is not just gender-sensitive but gender transformative, helping to challenge gendered inequalities and discrimination that can cause and perpetuate insecurity, conflict and violence.[62]

However, national and sub-national women's organisations and groups in South Sudan are 'currently missing out on the vast majority of international funding'.[63] Women in South Sudan face significant structural barriers to founding, growing and working for NGOs, as entrenched gender inequalities mean that women are less likely to possess the social, political and economic capital (including levels of education, experience in and connections to international organisations and access to resources) that help an organisation access international funding.[64] Similar to women's experiences elsewhere, in

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[56] See 'Chapter 1: The Role of Civil Society in South Sudan: challenges and opportunities' in Virk K, Nganje F (2016), 'The Peacebuilding Role of Civil Society in South Sudan', Centre for Conflict Resolution, November.

[57] D'Arcy M (2020), 'When international NGOs try to "help" local ones and fail', Impact Cap Initiative, April.

[58] Roundtable participant, 5 May 2021.

[59] Soma E (2020), 'Our Search for Peace: Women in South Sudan's National Peace Processes, 2005–2018', Oxfam and UN Women, January.

[60] Kezie-Nwoha H, Were J (2018), 'Women's Informal Peace Efforts: Grassroots Activism in South Sudan', CMI Brief; See also Kumalo L, Roddy-Mullineaux C (2019), 'Sustaining peace: Harnessing the power of South Sudanese women', Institute for Security Studies.

[61] Mai NJH (2015), 'The Role of Women in Peace–Building in South Sudan', The Sudd Institute, December.

[62] Jayasinghe, Khatun, Okwii (2020) op cit.

[63] Pelham S (2020), 'Born to Lead: Recommendations on Increasing Women's Participation in South Sudan's Peace Process', Oxfam, January.

[64] Moro et al., op cit.

South Sudan women leaders must balance their work with child care and other family responsibilities, facing a 'dual', and mainly hidden, burden that their male counterparts often do not.[65]

Efforts to localise aid can promote women's leadership, but this is not automatic and is undermined by patriarchal structures, harmful gender norms, and entrenched ways of working.[66] This was strongly reiterated by women roundtable participants, who highlighted the distinctive challenges they faced in participating in the humanitarian space. One participant, for example, described the marginalisation of women-led organisations in the funding system leaving her feeling 'humiliated and intimidated'.[67] Participants called for greater funding and capacity strengthening support for women-led organisations, as well as opportunities for learning, mentoring and access to information, and to exchange experience with other organisations, nationally and internationally. Issues of intersectionality are also important here, to ensure that 'localisation' translates into more opportunities for marginalised groups, including young and rural women and groups that represent them. This has implications for conflict sensitivity: harmful gender norms and practices play a role in fuelling conflict in South Sudan, and gender *in*sensitive localisation risks reinforcing existing inequalities, while missing opportunities to promote women's leadership or participation.

Transferring financial, reputational and security risks

How South Sudanese actors are funded is critical to ensuring localisation is conflict sensitive. Short-term, prescriptive funding from donors, UN agencies or INGOs makes it hard for South Sudanese organisations to sustain and deepen their impact or develop projects that respond to community priorities. Time- and resource-pressured national organisations struggle to find time to attend trainings and reflect on conflict-sensitive approaches.[68] South Sudanese NGOs, like other aid actors, have a responsibility to ensure their work is conflict sensitive, but international organisations have a role to play in ensuring the way that they fund South Sudanese organisations facilitates this.

A core issue – raised in many reports – is that South Sudanese NGOs depend on short-term, projectised funding, making it hard to build institutional capacity, or to retain key staff and the learning, relationships and experience that they hold. [69] One 2017 study found the majority of agreements last between three and 12 months.[70] Short-term funding, often with limited support for core costs, makes it difficult for South Sudanese NGOs to strengthen internal and governance systems or invest in assets, and means more time spent meeting donor requirements and applying for new grants. This also limits their ability to continually assess the context, monitor conflict risks, capitalise on opportunities for conflict-sensitive programming, and to apply learning from good or bad practice. Short-term funding also makes it difficult to pursue longer-term outcomes or systemic changes that address root causes, responding to and delivering consistently on community priorities and expectations, and sustain meaningful relationships with local authorities and communities. This is not a new issue: the 2010 *Aiding the Peace* evaluation noted that short-term interventions mean South Sudanese NGOs 'find themselves being drawn from one project to another without being able to build up core skills or clarify their actual intentions. They engage in short bursts of activity rather than a sustained presence in particular localities.'[71] As donors consider multi-year funding arrangements, intermediary organisations need to ensure that the benefits of this are shared with local partners.

Relatedly, South Sudanese NGOs struggle to retain staff, partly because of lower salaries and benefits relative to international agencies, and partly because short-term funding creates uncertain and

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[65] Jayasinghe, Khatun, Okwii (2020) op cit.
[66] Jayasinghe, Khatun, Okwii (2020) op cit.
[67] Roundtable, 17 June 2021
[68] Morris and Midgley, op cit.
[69] See, for example, Ali et al., op cit, Kiewied et al., op cit., Wilkinson et al., op cit.
[70] Ali et al., op cit.
[71] Bennet J, Pantuliano S, Fenton W, Vaux A, Barnett C, Brusset E (2010), 'Aiding the peace: Multi-donor Evaluation of Support to Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities in Southern Sudan 2005-2010', ITAD, December.

intermittent employment conditions. This leads to a loss of knowledge, and the relationships through which that knowledge is brokered, and trust developed. This also creates competition for staff between international and national NGOs that can increase tensions between them, particularly around inequalities in recruitment and remuneration. Challenges in retaining staff also compound 'founder's syndrome' amongst South Sudanese NGOs, where the founder may be the only long-term staff member. This centralises decision-making at the top, making it hard to build sustainable, cohesive, and diverse teams and undermining the resilience of the organisation to leadership changes.[72] In the words of one roundtable participant, 'once we prepare our staff, train them and capacitate them… an international organisation comes and picks our staff who are readily made by local organisations.'[73]

Additionally, L/NNGO running costs are often not fully covered, due in part to high operating costs in South Sudan and a reluctance among international actors to cover administrative and core function costs, with some providing no or limited overheads in sub-contracts to South Sudanese organisations.[74] Local and national organisations, and international partners with more favourable funding terms (i.e., those who share their overheads with local partners), end up effectively subsidising these projects. Access to core funding, or even covering the overhead costs of implementing a project, is increasingly recognised as one of the most effective ways to strengthen organisational capacity, and inconsistent or non-funding of core or overhead costs is a key inequity between national and international organisations.[75] This can negatively impact on conflict sensitivity: limited unrestricted, core or overheads funding increases the financial, reputational and security risks for local and national NGOs, undermines their independent organisational decision-making on risk management, and leaves little room for adaptation.[76]

A final issue relates to trust, capacity strengthening and support to manage identified issues. There is a sense that local and national NGOs are being held to higher standards than international agencies, and that they are more likely to be penalised for shortcomings in their audits, rather than supported to address issues identified. This leads to significant frustration among local actors and contributes to their mistrust of international actors. Fraud and corruption are important issues for all aid actors in South Sudan and elsewhere, and NNGOs need systems to ensure transparency and financial accountability. However, as one report highlights, 'they cannot be expected to have these in place without support'.[77] While there are many training opportunities available, these do not always focus on the things local actors need, and there is a lack of follow up support (including mentorship and funding) to put learning into practice. Approaches to assessing and strengthening capacity typically focus on 'upward' accountability (to donors) rather than 'downward' accountability (to communities) and can often ignore building the governance systems in local organisations. In the words of a local NGO representative quoted in one study, 'INGOs tend to have an inward-looking lens when assessing us. For example, compliance toward them is not what we need in order to be a better organization.'[78]

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[72] Moro et al., op cit.
[73] Roundtable participant, 5 May 2021
[74] Ali et al., op cit.
[75] Howe, Munive, Rosenstock, op cit.
[76] Hamsik, op cit.
[77] Ali et al., op cit.
[78] Howe et al., op cit.

Power imbalances in humanitarian action

Prospects for conflict-sensitive localisation are undermined by the unequal distribution of power in the aid system: this inhibits local leadership, open and honest discussion, including about conflict and risk, and the potential for local actors' knowledge and ideas to substantially shape interventions. Underlying many of these issues is structural bias embedded in the aid system, including practices and attitudes that assume the neutrality and superior 'capacity' of international organisations and staff, and in parallel, mistrust and devalue the knowledge, expertise and capacity of local organisations and national staff.[79] The benefits outlined above will only be realised if the perspectives, insights and experiences of diverse local actors and national staff are valued, there is a concerted effort to challenge underlying prejudices, and the balance of power shifts, both within specific projects and organisations and the wider aid system.

First, in the top-down, 'sub-contracting' approach that currently dominates, local and national actors have few opportunities to lead and shape the design and delivery of aid. This is not a new issue, nor is it unique to South Sudan. Various reports point out that relationships between international and South Sudanese NGOs are still largely experienced as prescriptive, transactional, and deeply unbalanced.[80] This, in turn, limits the possibilities for local and national actors to pursue the community acceptance and engagement strategies that are crucial to working in complex, conflict-affected settings, and limits the prospects for 'radically improving humanitarian aid delivery through more transformative partnerships'.[81]

> **'Partnership' Experiences**
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> 'To be in partnership means that we go side by side…you put your ideas together. But I think for the case of South Sudan, this has not been the practice. The donors, the international agencies, come with their ideas, you either take it or leave it. Because you wanted to survive as an institution, you wanted to keep the organisation, you wanted to maintain the staff, you have to take it, because you have no other option.'
>
> *Source: Roundtable participant, 5 May 2021*

Second, local, and national actors can contribute to conflict sensitivity at the system level, through their contextual knowledge, experience and relationships described above. South Sudanese NGOs continue to report feeling marginalised in coordination mechanisms and having limited influence over decision-making.[82] Ensuring their participation when strategic decisions are made – for example around the placement and prioritisation of aid – is key. However, prospects for the meaningful inclusion of local actors, with the potential to inform and shape decisions, are limited by both access to and dynamics within these spaces. There has been a push for South Sudanese NGO participation and leadership in the cluster system, and as of 2019 more than 50% of cluster members at national and sub-national levels in South Sudan were local or national NGOs. However, they held less than 10% of leadership or co-leadership positions at the national level, and less than 15% of these positions at the state level.[83]

Several barriers undermine the participation of South Sudanese NGOs in coordination mechanisms, including a lack of time, funding, electricity, internet, transport costs and other factors. The shift from in-person to virtual meetings also made it harder for South Sudanese staff and organisations to participate meaningfully. Deeper issues of power hierarchies, organisational cultures, and entrenched ways of working also impact the ability of local and national NGO staff members to contribute to and

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[79] Peace Direct et al., op cit.

[80] Kiewied et al., op cit., Tanner, Moro, op cit., Alcayna T, Al-Murani F (2016), 'A city-specific focus on local and international collaboration: Tacloban, Ormoc and Palo (the Philippines); Medellín (Colombia); Juba (South Sudan)', IIED Working Paper, November.

[81] Kiewied et al., op cit., p5

[82] CARE, Christian Aid, Tearfund, ActionAid, CAFOD and Oxfam (2019), 'Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships – Recommendations for Operational Practices That Strengthen the Leadership of National and Local Actors in Partnership-Based Humanitarian Action in South Sudan', February.

[83] Els et al., op cit.

influence decision-making within these meetings. The cluster system 'creates cultural spaces and decision-making forums that are most comfortable for international staff', who can form connections through the social networks of the international aid community.[84] More inclusive fora is not just about who is physically 'in the room', but also whose voices are listened to and valued.

Navigating the politicisation of aid

All aid in South Sudan carries the risk of being exploited or manipulated by warring parties, regardless of who delivers it.[85] While local actors may be better placed to identify and plan for risks associated with the instrumentalisation of aid, they can also face heightened pressures and risks.

Findings across multiple studies on South Sudan have highlighted that local and national NGOs understand and are committed to humanitarian principles, similar to their international counterparts, and use these principles to negotiate access, navigate relationships with local authorities and avoid aid diversion.[86] Nonetheless, South Sudanese civil society has been affected by conflict and polarisation, generating mistrust and damaging relations within and between organisations, and understanding how partners are politically positioned is important.[87] International organisations need to invest in understanding who their partners are, how they fit into the South Sudanese civil society landscape and how they relate to political and conflict dynamics.

Studies also reflect on what constitutes a 'principled' humanitarian response in South Sudan. One study, for example, highlights the central role of community acceptance and engagement in operationalising the humanitarian principles and securing access to the most affected populations. Community acceptance requires being 'respectful, open, transparent and accountable', and being able to reconcile the humanitarian principles with the values of communities which, in turn, 'takes time, and requires genuine appreciation of, and respect for, such value-systems'.[88] However, the study also highlights limited opportunities for international and South Sudanese organisations to share experiences on how to contextualise and translate the principles into actionable strategies, calling for a 'safe space' for relevant discussions to take place.[89]

Local and national NGOs, as well as local and national staff of international agencies, can face distinctive and heightened barriers and pressures in the delivery of aid. The pressure to reconcile competing demands, values, practices, and timeframes – of communities, donors, authorities, and others – is felt most starkly by local actors who are often on the 'frontline' of the humanitarian response. One report highlights that national NGOs, and particularly local NGOs from the communities where they work, do not have the same resources available as INGOs, and as a result do not always have the same negotiation power with authorities. Because of this, they can be more affected by pressure from local authorities and communities, and do not have the same ability to protect their staff as international agencies do.[90] The same report also finds that South Sudanese NGOs and field staff 'carry a heavy share of the responsibility and risks that emerge when international norms and local values and realities meet and conflict on the ground'; INGOs face the same risks but have more resources available to mitigate them. When transgressions come to light, national staff and NNGOs are more likely to be held responsible.[91]

Ultimately, all aid actors operating in South Sudan face difficult decisions and trade-offs. Humanitarians seek to operate in accordance with international humanitarian principles and local value systems in a context of conflict and economic crisis. However, prospects for honest discussion

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[84] Tanner and Moro, op cit.
[85] See e.g., Rolandsen and Kindersley, op cit.
[86] Howe et al., op cit.; Moro et al., op cit.; Kiewied et al., op cit.; Wilkinson et al., op cit.
[87] Virk and Nganje, op cit.
[88] Kiewied, Soremekun, and Jok, op cit.
[89] ibid.
[90] Santschi, Gworo, and White, op cit.
[91] Ibid.

of these challenges are undermined when international actors assume that NNGOs are *inherently* less able to respect humanitarian principles. There is a need for more safe spaces to openly discuss challenges around conflict sensitivity and the politicisation of aid without fear of sanction.

What does this mean for the aid community?

Principles for conflict-sensitive localisation

The findings outlined above highlight the interplay between localisation and conflict sensitivity in South Sudan. Localisation has the real potential to make aid more conflict sensitive, as South Sudanese actors have their own unique, and often personal, experiences to draw on regarding both the positive and negative impact aid can have on conflict dynamics. At the same time, localisation should not be seen as the panacea for conflict-sensitive aid, as the process itself needs to be conflict sensitive, as South Sudanese civil society, not surprisingly, is not immune to the same factors that have created divisions and harmful gender norms, marginalised groups and fostered violent competition over control of resources that have fuelled conflict in South Sudan. Even with the best of intentions, efforts towards localisation that do not consider certain principles risk causing harm and exacerbating conflict dynamics, while missing important opportunities to contribute to peace.

Prioritise contextual understanding and embed conflict sensitivity and power analysis within strategies and decision-making around 'localisation': Strategies, approaches, and decisions related to 'localisation' should be based on an understanding of specific (national, subnational, and local) contexts. Use a conflict-sensitive lens to consider how decisions about who to partner with, when, and where, might affect complex relationships and power dynamics. Once selected, partners should be supported and resourced to ensure they can carry out their work safely and sensitively. Ongoing power analysis would help international organisations to assess how power and biases within their own organisations and partnerships, as well as the wider humanitarian architecture, could affect meaningful localisation. Participatory analysis and reflection with local partners will also help them to understand how their efforts to localise aid (who is funded, how, and where) could either exacerbate or challenge deeply rooted dynamics of inequality and marginalisation. Such analyses will enable international actors to adapt their approaches accordingly.[92]

Situate interventions within a longer-term vision or theory of change: Interventions in South Sudan need to be embedded within a longer-term vision, regardless of the funding timeframe involved. It is important to recognise how aid has shaped the NGO landscape in South Sudan, draw on lessons learned from three decades of 'capacity-building' interventions, and value what already exists, especially diverse local capacities. As articulated in a recent paper on local peacebuilding in South Sudan: 'Donor mechanisms should better reflect the need to be 'in it for the long haul', especially when supporting local organisations. Evaluation and monitoring needs to move away from management for results and the collection of success stories to favour flexibility, creativity, trust-building, support to real local capacity for the day-to-day work of sustaining peace, and the difficult and uncertain work of engaging hard to reach people across multiple levels.'[93]

Strategically prioritise engagement with South Sudanese actors and invest in relationships: Related to the above is the need to move beyond a project lens when working with local and national actors. Many of the best practice examples identified involve a commitment to building long-term, trusting relationships, providing partners with the flexibility and space to implement approaches that they consider to be important, and understanding each other's strengths and weaknesses. This requires a commitment to working with and building on capacities and initiatives that already exist at local and subnational levels. Funding agencies need to be flexible and creative, to meaningfully engage with a

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[92] See, Christian Aid (2016), 'Power Analysis – Programme Practice', January, as well Rolandsen O, Kindersley N (2017), 'South Sudan: A Political Economy Analysis', Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, October.
[93] Milner C (2018), 'In it for the Long Haul? Lessons on Peacebuilding in South Sudan', Christian Aid, July.

wide set of actors – especially marginalised groups, and those with less experience of the international humanitarian system – and avoid assuming that South Sudanese organisations should mimic the structures and processes of international NGOs. This is important not just for the diversity and quality of partnerships but also for enabling local and national actors to work in conflict-sensitive ways.

Invest in fostering a culture of collaboration and complementarity: Working with local actors offers significant possibilities for conflict sensitivity as described above. At the same time, local actors being able to draw on resources and support from international organisations can be crucial, whether in the form of the capacity to negotiate access or the physical infrastructure of a large UN agency or INGO, solidarity, and support in a context of shrinking civic space, or technical expertise and institutional strengthening support in specific areas. In the words of one workshop participant, 'we want to work together with INGOs, it is not about replacement, but we need them to advocate with donors for equal opportunities'.[94]

Conclusion and Recommendations

The principles outlined above, and the recommendations below focus on conflict sensitivity implications specifically. While there is still much more to be understood about localisation in the South Sudanese context, there already exists a wealth of existing research, experience, and discussions on the topic. For international actors committed to localisation, it is important that they familiarise themselves with this existing body of work, much of which can be found on the CSRF repository – to do otherwise risks 're-inventing the wheel'.

It is critical that the aid sector continues to prioritise spaces for open and frank discussion and dialogue around what 'localisation' means in South Sudan, the challenges, obstacles, and opportunities. This will require that donors and international actors reflect on how locally led aid can be marginalised, consider how biases (unconscious or explicit) about race, gender or local actors' capacities can colour decision making, and understand how their decisions could deepen (or mitigate) existing fault lines or dynamics of marginalisation within South Sudanese society. Without honest dialogue around these issues, it will be difficult for international actors to identify changes needed to their structures and processes and to translate localisation commitments into good practice.

Recommendations

To donors and other international actors:

- **Ensure inclusive, accessible, and contextually appropriate funding:** Besides quantifiable commitments of funding for local actors, assessing the quality of and how funding processes work is critical to supporting South Sudanese organisations' capacity to programme in a conflict-sensitive way. Revisiting and adapting partner selection criteria or scoring methods, as needed, to consider not only capacity, but also equity, geographic representation, and evidence of local consultation would ensure that the selection and funding of South Sudanese organisations is more inclusive. To make funding more accessible to a wider group of local actors, consider ring-fencing funding for marginalised groups, ensure information about funding is available both online and offline, and simplify application requirements for smaller funding pots. Related to this, all agencies and organisations providing funding[95] should consider covering South Sudanese NGOs' costs associated with collaborative approaches during the design and tendering process, thereby providing organisations with the financial resources needed to undertake processes that inform conflict sensitive programming. Finally, flexible, or context-specific finance reporting requirements, core funding and more equitable

94 Workshop participant, 17 June 2021.
95 This refers to donor governments, UN agencies and INGOs, all of whom act as 'donors' to L/NNGOs.

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sharing of overhead costs would help enable independent organisational decision-making around conflict risks and opportunities and strengthen institutional capacity.

- **Strengthen shared contextual understanding and support spaces for dialogue on key issues:** Ensure there are meaningful spaces and platforms for international and South Sudanese organisations to discuss conflict issues, and how they analyse and adapt to them, both together and separately. A shared understanding would help to address misconceptions that international actors have around South Sudanese actors' impartiality and commitment to humanitarian principles, enable greater flexibility, and maximise opportunities to build on local capacities for peace.

- **Invest in building stronger relationships with diverse local actors:** Spend more time talking to a diverse range of local actors, especially outside of Juba, with a particular focus on the inclusion of marginalised groups, including women and youth. Conflict sensitivity analysis is not a 'one and done' exercise, but rather an ongoing process. The 'Juba bubble' can distort analysis and limit awareness of whose voices and perspectives are included and excluded in relation to conflict-sensitive decision-making around aid. Bringing in diverse voices could challenge the current dynamic of 'upward' accountability to donors and refocus the discussion on 'downward' accountability to communities; this should be welcomed by all, as it will also provide greater and more diverse insights into how aid and conflict are interacting.

- **Prioritise South Sudanese researchers to lead research and evaluation related to localisation:** Donors should facilitate South Sudanese researchers and research institutions to evaluate progress towards 'localisation', as well as the longer-term impact of 'localisation' initiatives and the interrelationship between localisation and conflict sensitivity. Facilitating locally led analysis and measurement relevant to 'localisation' is particularly important given that assessments of progress towards 'localisation' have often been undertaken by international organisations and researchers (including the present author).

- **Explore more equitable models of partnership:** This could include facilitating national NGOs to be grant holders or lead consortia, contracting INGOs for specific expertise and support as required. Working in consortia may offer opportunities to work in a 'capacity sharing space that builds upon complementarities, rather than sub-contracting'.[96]

To South Sudanese NGOs:

- **Reflect upon and seize ownership of what 'conflict sensitivity' really means in the South Sudan context:** 'Conflict sensitivity' risks becoming another internationally led approach, with the voice and perspectives of international actors dominating the discussion and decision-making. It is critical that South Sudanese organisations actively engage with discussions on conflict sensitivity, thereby raising awareness among international actors of opportunities and risks associated with conflict sensitivity that South Sudanese actors could face.

- **Ensure conflict sensitivity informs organisational systems, decisions, and approaches:** Integrate relevant means of assessing and reflecting upon conflict sensitivity risks and opportunities and adapting as appropriate. Reflect on and share learning from these approaches and experiences to inform wider discussions around conflict-sensitive localisation, particularly during discussions with donors and the wider aid community in South Sudan.

- **Engage and support a wider diversity of local actors:** South Sudanese NGOs with connections to the international aid community should consider how they engage and support a wider diversity of local actors – especially women-led organisations and other marginalised groups –

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[96] Wilkinson, de Wolf, and Alier, 'The Triple Nexus and Local Faith Actors in South Sudan: Findings from Primary Research'.

and consciously draw on local actors' knowledge of conflict dynamics in their communities. This would help to build a 'body of knowledge' amongst South Sudanese organisations at various levels on conflict sensitivity and ensure that strategies, programmes, policies, and practices are responsive to and inclusive of all groups' wider concerns and priorities. Seeking to build more equitable partnerships with local actors could also help to mitigate some of the frustration felt towards national NGOs by more local actors, while modelling new and better modes of engagement to the international community, particularly around conflict sensitivity.

- **Discuss priorities and challenges with international partners, including those related to conflict sensitivity:** Engage in open and honest conversation with donors and partners (including INGOs and UN agencies) about local priorities, risks, and challenges in ensuring a principled response, and the real costs of working safely and effectively.

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