



Aiding the Peace:

Revisiting Key Lessons from the CPA Years for International Engagement in South Sudan

October 2023

This research was conducted by Miklos Gosztonyi¹ with support of the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) colleagues. The Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility supports conflict-sensitive aid programming in South Sudan, is funded by the EU, UK, Swiss, Canadian and Netherlands Donor Missions in South Sudan and is implemented by a consortium of NGOs including Saferworld and swisspeace.

¹ The author would like to thank Martina Santschi and Natalia Chan for their sustained efforts supporting the writing of the early version of this report, and especially Leslye Rost van Tonningen for her commitment and support shaping and editing this final version. The author would also like to also thank Sara Pantuliano and Wendy Fenton for their important insights on *Aiding the Peace* in the early stages of this research. The opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the author.

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Acronyms

ARCSS	Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CSRF	Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility
JAM	Joint Assessment Mission
OLS	Operation Lifeline Sudan
R-ARCSS	Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army's
SRSR	Special Representative of the Secretary General
R-TGoNU	Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity

The interim period between the signing of the Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) on January 9, 2005, and South Sudan's independence on July 9, 2011, saw a strong engagement by Western countries, especially the Troika (United States, United Kingdom, and Norway) which, as guarantors of the CPA, used their political weight to ensure that the implementation of the peace agreement would proceed as agreed by the signatories. Concurrently, substantial financial resources were allocated to fund Southern Sudan's humanitarian and development needs and to build the institutions and capacities of the semi-autonomous Government of Southern Sudan.²

The political and economic support provided by Western governments was grounded on the belief of a commonality of objectives with the leadership of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army's (SPLM/A). A key assumption was that southern leaders were committed to lay the foundations of a democratic state that would progressively deliver public services and development to a population who had suffered from systematic neglect by successive Sudanese governments since Sudan became independent in 1956. This assumption was not unjustified, since it was in line with the aspirations embraced by the SPLM/A since its formation in 1983. A commitment that was later reaffirmed by President Kiir on his Independence Day speech on July 9, 2011, when he pledged to lead a government that is "democratic, inclusive, and accountable."³

The decision by the South Sudanese government to abruptly shut down oil production in January 2012 while negotiating post-independence arrangements with Khartoum led to the first major falling-out with donors. Since at the time of independence South Sudan had the most oil-dependent economy in the world,⁴ the decision to stop oil production alarmed donors, as it appeared that South Sudan's ruling elite believed Western countries would cover for the resulting financial gap. The government's praise of the 'resilience of South Sudanese to cope' after donors made it clear that support wasn't coming was disconcerting, particularly to the US government, which had been a reliable supporter of the SPLM/A leadership for more than three decades.⁵

The real point of inflection in the relationship came with the outbreak of the civil war on December 15, 2013. The unwillingness by all sides of the conflict to stop the violence, despite mounting evidence of war crimes, while the humanitarian situation steadily deteriorated raised difficult questions for international actors who had unequivocally identified with the cause of the SPLM/A. Moreover, the dramatic collapse of the 2015 Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) in July 2016 and subsequent cycles of violence, the targeting of civilians, forced displacement, and deepening of the humanitarian crisis further eroded the perception of a commonality of interests between South Sudan's leaders and its Western donors and supporters.

Not that there had not been sufficient signals during the CPA years that should have raised concerns, especially the extensive misappropriation of public funds by the ruling elite. For the most, however, Western supporters turned a blind eye, convinced that no excesses by South Sudanese leaders could match the evils of their counterparts in Khartoum. In this sense the CPA years were, as a long time South Sudan expert noted, a period of a 'willing suspension of disbelief' by international actors. The

² In addition to the Troika countries, major bilateral donors included Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, as well as the EU, the World Bank, and some UN agencies.

³ President Kiir's Independence Speech, 9 July, 2011, available at <https://paanluelwel.com/2011/07/11/president-kiirs-independence-speech-july-9th-2011/>

⁴ It is estimated that at the time of independence, oil revenue amounted to 82% of the country's gross domestic product and to 98% of government income. See Alex de Waal, 'Sizzling South Sudan: Why Oil Is Not the Whole Story,' *Foreign Affairs*, February 7, 2013.

⁵ For a study of the deterioration of the relationship between Washington and Juba, see Zach Vertin, *A Rope from the Sky: The Making and Unmaking of the World's Newest State*, Pegasus Books, 2019.

contrast with the present day can be best summarized by the fact that South Sudan has been under sanctions by the UN Security Council since 2015, including an arms embargo since 2018, and that Western countries were not signatories to the Revitalized Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) signed on September 12, 2018.

Since the signing of the R-ARCSS, international engagement in South Sudan has focused on the implementation of the agreement's benchmarks, following the former Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) David Shearer's premise that the peace agreement constitutes "the only game in town."⁶ However, as the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) was repeatedly delayed, and little progress was made on the unification of the armed forces, the establishment of financial transparency mechanisms, transitional justice, the opening up political space, or the establishment of the legal and technical conditions needed to hold elections, frustration among international actors grew.

When thinking about their current engagement in South Sudan, international actors would benefit from some historical perspective. Although the current situation differs in crucial ways from CPA interim period, there are striking similarities in some of the assumptions that underpinned international engagement then and now. This paper will reflect on the relevance of those assumptions to help international actors working in South Sudan identify solutions to present dilemmas.

Aiding the Peace revisited

There exists a large number of analyses, research, and evaluations conducted since the CPA was signed from which the international actors in South Sudan can draw. Unfortunately, the sheer volume of documents also means that critical ones can be overlooked, such as the seminal donor-commissioned report published on the eve of South Sudan's independence titled *Aiding the Peace: A Multi-donor Evaluation of Support to Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities in Southern Sudan 2005–2010*.⁷

Based on more than a year of work by a team of sixteen consultants, the report was the product of fieldwork conducted in seven out of Southern Sudan's ten states. It represents the most comprehensive publicly available review of international engagement in conflict prevention and peacebuilding programmes in South Sudan during the CPA years.

Aiding the Peace's significance lies not only in its scope and depth, but also in that it challenged some of core assumptions that guided donor engagement during the CPA years which had a determinant impact on donor policies and programming. Three key contributions made by *Aiding the Peace* particularly stand out:

1. The report challenged the assumption that the signing of the CPA meant that Southern Sudan had transitioned to a post-conflict phase.
2. Donor interventions during the CPA years were based on the assumption that investing in the delivery of public services would reduce the likelihood of violence. *Aiding the Peace* challenged this assumption and stressed that political and economic marginalisation, not lack of public services, was the main driver of conflict in Southern Sudan.

⁶ See, for example, UN News, "Dramatic drop in South Sudan political violence since peace agreement signing," 5 February 2019, available at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/02/1032041>

⁷ Jon Bennett et al, *Aiding the Peace: A Multi-donor Evaluation of Support to Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities in Southern Sudan 2005-2010*, Hove: ITAD Ltd., 2010, available at <https://www.oecd.org/countries/southsudan/46895095.pdf>

3. *Aiding the Peace* criticized the excessive focus on the technical aspects of programming and the use of good practices to the detriment of whether programmes or practices were addressing the drivers of conflict.

These observations, this paper will argue, are as relevant today as they were when *Aiding the Peace* was published more than a decade ago. Although crucial contextual changes have taken place over the past twelve years, some of the core assumptions of international engagement guiding policy and programming in South Sudan remain unchanged.⁸

War and peace

‘The evaluation has... chosen to depict Southern Sudan as ‘in conflict’ rather than ‘post- conflict’... the discourse around ‘post-conflict’ and ‘recovery’ has been a smokescreen that obscures the fact that there is little to ‘recover’ and the country is still very much ‘in conflict.’”

Aiding the Peace, p.76

International engagement during the CPA years was based on the assumption that with the signing of the CPA, Southern Sudan had transitioned to a post-conflict phase. As *Aiding the Peace* observed, this led donors to overlook the persistence of conflict across the country and to make programming and policy decisions that were ill-suited for the reality of the country.

The origins of this misconception can be found in the fact that international attention during the CPA years was concentrated on the agreement’s capacity to put an end to hostilities between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). The lens on the North-South axis did not give sufficient importance to the fact that as a result of the 1991 SPLM/A split, the war evolved into a complex web of interlocked southern wars.⁹ With most attention concentrating on the North/South axis, as years passed and the independence referendum approached, sub-national violence persisted across Southern Sudan.¹⁰ Although the CPA had brought an end to conflict between its two signatories, and as a result large parts of the country experienced a decline in violence and relative stability, violence continued in many other areas of the soon-to-be-born country.

Similarly, despite the cessation of hostilities since 2018 between the R-ARCSS signatories at the national level, violence persisted across the country and new conflicts flared up in areas that had been relatively stable in previous years. There is hardly anything new in this. As Naomi Pendle observes, ‘for decades in South Sudan, peace agreements have not stopped protracted armed conflicts being part of life. In addition, they have not stopped physical or arbitrary violence by governing authorities... Instead, peace has often been synonymous with increased physical violence and impunity.’¹¹ Pendle’s observation should make us reflect about the inadequacy of using

⁸ This paper does not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of *Aiding the Peace*, which, with annexes, is 265 pages. Instead, it focuses on the three key observations identified by two of the report’s authors as the most substantial and controversial contributions that the report made.

⁹ Douglas Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan’s Civil Wars*, Indiana University Press, 3rd edition, 2016,

¹⁰ See Mareike Schomerus & Tim Allen, “Southern Sudan at odds with itself: Dynamics of conflict and predicaments of peace,” London: LSE Development Studies Department (DESTIN), 2010, available at <https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csdc-background-papers/South-Sudan-at-Odds-with-Itself.pdf>

¹¹ Naomi Pendle (2023), *Spiritual Contestations: The Violence of Peace in South Sudan*, James Currey, 2023, p. 20.

dichotomies like war/peace to grasp South Sudan's complex social, political, and conflict dynamics.¹² Transitions from war to peace are not linear and using dichotomous categories such as war/peace or conflict/post-conflict is problematic in that they presuppose a linear path towards predetermined outcomes.

Lack of conceptual clarity when discussing violence in South Sudan results in explanations that are unable to grasp conflict drivers. As a paper from WFP and CSRF puts it, 'to describe organised violence in South Sudan, terms like cattle raiding and revenge, ethnic or tribal violence, and inter-communal violence are widely employed...Not only do dominant narratives and labels encourage misleading explanations for the violence [but] they also discourage ongoing critical and fine-grained assessments of real-life conflict dynamics. In short, common labels and terms used to describe organised sub-national violence in South Sudan do more to obscure than to explain the how and why of violence.'¹³

Part of the problem resides in a distinction that is often made between violence perpetrated by the signatories of peace agreements, which is labelled as 'political,' while other forms of violence are interchangeably labelled as 'daily,' 'local,' 'intercommunal,' etc. According to this common distinction, if a country is not experiencing 'political' violence between the main signatories of a peace agreement, the country is considered to be at 'peace.' The claim is problematic not only because violence continues to be the norm for people living across the country, but also because a large part of the violence that is referred to as 'daily,' 'local,' or 'intercommunal,' is usually fuelled by the very same national political, military, and economic elites that are the signatories of peace agreements. The distinction between these forms of violence is therefore both conceptually and practically untenable.

Underlying these conceptual problems is also a misunderstanding of the actual meaning of peace agreements for the South Sudanese political and military elite. Since Sudan's independence in 1956, warring parties have interpreted peace agreements not as critical junctures imposing serious constraints on their behaviour but as strategic opportunities to take a break until the next move.¹⁴ Peace agreements in the two Sudans have invariably been top-down and used by ruling elites as opportunities to renegotiate power and the allocation of positions and resources amongst themselves. As a result, signatories have systematically implemented peace agreements in extremely selective ways that deliberately didn't alter the core of the system of governance. This was clearly the case of the CPA, which led to the reproduction of the old Sudan's system of governance in the South. The same pattern of a selective implementation of peace agreements continues today with the R-ARCSS, which has for the most been reduced to the allocation of positions between the signatories, in what amounts to one of the many legacies of the old Sudan on post-independence South Sudan.

¹² Over the past two decades, academic research has increasingly highlighted that the distinction between 'war' and 'peace' is less empirically observable than what is commonly believed in contexts like South Sudan's. See, for example, Paul Richards (Ed.), *No Peace, No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*, Ohio University Press, 2004.

¹³ See WFP and CSRF, 'Adjusting Terminology for Organised Violence in South Sudan,' 2020, available at <https://www.csrfsouthsudan.org/repository/adjusting-terminology-for-organised-violence-in-south-sudan/>

¹⁴ The practice by the Sudanese elite of signing peace agreements only to later dishonour them is captured in the title of Abel Alier's book: *Southern Sudan: Too Many Agreements Dishonoured*, Ithaca Press, 1992.

Peace dividends

‘The confusion between ‘marginalisation’ and ‘lack of development’ led to an assumption that the lack of development in the South was not simply a matter of concern but a factor causing conflict. Local conflict may arise from disputes over access to resources, but these can escalate either because of historical factors or because of political manipulation. Lack of development... cannot be cited as either a sole or significant cause of conflict.’

Aiding the Peace, p.xv

Aiding the Peace also questioned another pillar of international engagement in South Sudan during the CPA years: the existence of a causal link between access to services and conflict. It was assumed that improving access to public services would reduce the probability that the country would return to conflict. *Aiding the Peace*’s analysis is worth quoting at length here, as the expectation that service delivery will contribute to reducing violence continues to the present day:

[A] dominant ‘theory of change’ emerged from the 2005 Joint Assessment Mission (JAM)... in which it was implied that lack of development was in itself a cause of conflict. Hence the theory is that ‘all development contributes to CPPB’, encapsulated in the term ‘peace dividend’. The logic seems to be that development is not only a reward for peace... but that failure to deliver a ‘peace dividend’ could lead to conflict.... the evidence for such a claim appears to come from studies on conflict prevention and peacebuilding conducted in other parts of the world, but the link between delivering services and abating violence is not found in Southern Sudan, despite this being the dominant paradigm that informs the aid operations.¹⁵

This oversight was the result of a flawed understanding of drivers of conflict, specifically around the meaning of marginalisation. As the authors argued, ‘*on the ground [marginalization] does not mean lack of services but political isolation combined with military domination.*’¹⁶ Although *Aiding the Peace* acknowledged that access to public services was urgently needed in Southern Sudan, lack of public services (and underdevelopment more generally) could not be seen by itself as a driver of conflict. In other words, lack of public services is a *symptom* of marginalisation, not its cause. Improving access to public services would therefore not address drivers of conflict in South Sudan.

Interestingly, *Aiding the Peace*’s analysis here resonates with the 1983 SPLM/A Manifesto. The Manifesto argued that the main root cause of conflict in Sudan was the existence of a hyper centralized system of governance that allowed a small riverine elite to exploit people living across the country’s vast peripheries.¹⁷ In this sense, *Aiding the Peace*’s claim that marginalization constitutes the main driver of conflict in South Sudan is in line with the analysis made by the SPLM/A Manifesto made two decades earlier.

If throughout the twenty-two-year civil war one of the SPLM/A’s main ambitions was to decentralize power and resources in a ‘New Sudan,’ the semi-autonomous Government of Southern Sudan and later the Government of South Sudan replicated Sudan’s hyper-centralized system of governance and

¹⁵ Jon Bennett et al., op. cit., p.xv

¹⁶ Jon Bennett et al., op. cit., p.xv

¹⁷ The SPLM/A Manifesto argued that ‘power has been centralized in Khartoum without meaningful devolution to the regions, even when a ‘federal’ system was adopted.’ It went on to describe the political system in Sudan as ‘a sham procedural democracy that was a camouflage for the perpetuation of vested interests. In that sham democracy civil rights were subject to the whims of rulers.’

of economic imbalance between the capital and the rest of the country. As independence approached, South Sudanese living across the country were well aware of this contradiction. In interviews conducted by the author in early 2011, respondents in state capitals talked about the fact that Juba was becoming the 'new Khartoum.'¹⁸ An observation that was echoed by Douglas Johnson when he noted that 'the government of South Sudan began to resemble those aspects of the Khartoum regime the SPLM had repeatedly repudiated: the concentration of power in the office of the president, interference in the administration of the states by the central government, and impunity of an increasingly arbitrary state security service.'¹⁹

The sense of marginalization that was already prevalent at the time of independence has arguably increased in South Sudan over the past twelve years. The country has seen an increase in the centralization of power, a weakening of the sense of national identity, and an increase in the economic gap between Juba and the rest of the country.

From a political point of view, not only the general elections that were to take place in 2015 as per South Sudan's Transitional Constitution have been repeatedly postponed, but the President has dismissed and appointed governors at will. Crucially, also, the formation of the R-TGoNU has systematically undermined local authority, further exacerbating the marginalization of the population. As Joshua Craze and Ferenc Marko observe, since the R-ARCSS granted the President and the First Vice-President the right to allocate nearly all positions at the national, state, and county level based on power-sharing quotas, the peace agreement "ate the grassroots." Unable to appoint country-level positions any longer, governors 'effectively try... [to] regain some of their lost power by appointing loyalists at the boma or payam level, dismissing chiefs, and politicizing civil service positions. The result is a total fragmentation of the political landscape, largely along ethnic and sub-ethnic lines. [As a result] rather than representing local concerns, grassroots institutions are now politicized according to the power-sharing logic one finds in the peace agreement.'²⁰

Also, the conflict since 2013 has weakened the already fragile sense of national identity that existed in 2011. If during the 1983-2005 war the main unifying factor of South Sudan's more than sixty cultural and linguistic groups had been the struggle against Khartoum, as Jok Madut Jok put it at the time of independence, the fundamental question facing the new country could be summed up as 'now that this struggle has borne fruit and there is no more north to blame, what will unite South Sudanese?'²¹

The war that began in December 2013 reinforced ethnic and sub-ethnic identities to the detriment of the idea of a common national identity. As Nicki Kindersley put it, the sense of pride of a new nation in the making was replaced by a violent politicization of ethnicity: 'recent atrocities and brutalities have deeply affected people who were personally invested in the old liberation struggle and the idea

¹⁸ Interviews conducted by the author in Bentiu, Malakal, Bor, and Torit between March and August 2011.

¹⁹ Douglas H. Johnson, *South Sudan: A New History for a New Nation*, Ohio University Press, 2016, p. 176.

²⁰ Joshua Craze and Ferenc Marko, "Death by Peace: How South Sudan's Peace Agreement Ate the Grassroots," African Arguments, 6 January 2021, available at <https://africanarguments.org/2022/01/death-by-peace-how-south-sudans-peace-agreement-ate-the-grassroots/>

²¹ Jok Madut Jok, 'Diversity, Unity, and Nation Building in South Sudan,' United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 287, October 2011, available at [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Diversity,%20Unity,%20and%20Nation%20Building%20in%20South%20Sudan%20\(Jok\).pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Diversity,%20Unity,%20and%20Nation%20Building%20in%20South%20Sudan%20(Jok).pdf)

of South Sudanese independence. There is now a much weaker (and tarnished) idea of a national South Sudanese identity.’²²

Contributing to the weakening of a sense of national identity and the hardening of ethnic and sub-ethnic identities was the increase of the number of states from 10 to 28 in October 2015, and from 28 to 32 in January 2017. The move reinforced zero-sum competition over administrative control, land rights, and resources between communities that had been historically interdependent. As Matthew Pritchard puts it, although these disputes over the number and boundaries of states are communicated around narratives of historical precedents and rights, they actually are ‘[about] competition over power and political ordering... The result is a zero-sum game where historically interdependent communities with overlapping rights compete for exclusive access to administrative resources in order to control the political and financial power that flows from them.’²³ The subsequent return to the 10 states and formation of the R-TGoNU should therefore not be confused with a return to the ex-ante status quo, since the increased number of states intensified exclusive claims over administrative units and hardened identities.

Finally, the economic gap between Juba and the rest of the country has visibly increased since independence. Not that the system was particularly egalitarian during the CPA years. It is estimated that between 2005 and 2011, the central government transferred only 17 percent of its budget to all lower levels of government. The same pattern was reproduced at the state level, as approximately 90% of those transfers remained in the state capitals, meaning that less than 2% of the national budget went to all counties, payams, and bomas combined.²⁴ The oil economy created the means for such centralization of power and wealth in Juba since the availability of oil revenue allowed for the establishment and reproduction of a state that is autonomous from society.²⁵

The degree of centralization of resources has arguably increased since independence. Although there are no reliable figures on financial transfers from the central government to state and local governments since 2011, it is reasonable to believe that transfers to state governments have in fact decreased given the severity of the fiscal crisis that the country has faced since the oil shutdown and the outbreak of the war. Between 2005 and 2012 the disparity in allocations between central and local governments was at least partly compensated by the fact that public salaries, especially those of the national army, were regularly paid, which resulted in a significant transfer of resources to all ten states. Comparatively speaking, the CPA years were a period of relative prosperity across South Sudan. Urban local economies grew thanks to the influx of money brought by government employees, which was also distributed to extended families according to South Sudanese custom. Since 2012,

²² Nicki Kindersley, ‘Returns and Peace in South Sudan: Challenges, opportunities and the way forward,’ Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, 2019, available at <https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Returns-and-Peace-in-South-Sudan-1.pdf>

²³ Matthew Pritchard and Aly Verjee, “South Sudan: From 10 States to 32 States and Back Again,” United States Institute of Peace, 2021, available at <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/03/south-sudan-10-states-32-states-and-back-again>

²⁴ It must be noted, however, that while these figures represent transfers from the central government to state and local governments, revenues were also collected by state and local governments but were not accounted for. See Sudd Institute (2012) “Mapping Social Accountability: An Appraisal of Policy Influence on Service Delivery in South Sudan, 2006-2011,” Policy Brief No.1. For an illustration of centralization of power at the state level, see Edward Thomas *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation*, Zed Books, 2015, pp. 143-144.

²⁵ This process of detachment of the state from society due to the availability of oil resources is central to what has been described as the “oil curse.” This phenomenon is of course not unique to South Sudan, and other prominent African cases include Nigeria, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea. For an in-depth analysis of the political and economic effects of the oil curse on South Sudan, see Luke A. Patey, “Crude days ahead? Oil and the resource curse in Sudan,” *African Affairs*, Vol. 109, No. 437, 2010.

however, with public salaries having gone unpaid for extended periods of time, this redistributive effect was significantly reduced. With local economies decimated, the South Sudanese Pound depreciated, and inflation soaring, the gap between the ruling elites and the population at large keeps on growing, fuelling and deepening the sense of political and economic marginalisation.

Conflict analysis

'The transition from war to peace is not a technical exercise but a highly political process. A sophisticated and nuanced analysis of power relations, causes of vulnerability, and drivers of conflict... was largely missing from the design and execution of many aid programmes.'

Aiding the Peace, p.xviii

Aiding the Peace provided a strong critique of the overemphasis on the technocratic aspects of programmes and a tick box approach to meet technical requirements and denounced the lack of conflict analysis as a starting point for interventions. The over-use of good practice priorities, the authors argued, overlooked the more basic question of whether or not programmes were effectively addressing drivers of conflict. Without denying the need for harmonization, coordination, and alignment, they stressed, 'the key consideration should always remain: are the interventions dealing adequately with key conflict drivers?'²⁶ This, the authors stressed, 'can only be achieved through a sophisticated and nuanced analysis of power relations, causes of vulnerability, drivers of conflict and resilience indicators.'²⁷ They went on to recommend that programmes are based on a conflict analysis that looks at how wider dynamics are linked to the specific programming area, and that conflict analysis is conducted continuously throughout the project cycle, not just when a project or programme is being designed.²⁸

Since *Aiding the Peace* was published, the need to integrate conflict analysis into programming has become axiomatic. The last decade has seen an increase in donor investment in conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity capacities in South Sudan, as evidenced by the creation of the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRf) and conflict analysis positions in some organizations operating in the country.²⁹ Despite the widespread consensus on the importance of conflict analysis, its impact has remained limited, as this requires donors and agencies to be willing to use conflict analysis as the starting point for designing their interventions, and, perhaps more importantly, to rethink programmes and priorities when the analysis contradicts what they feel institutionally inclined to do.³⁰

Unfortunately, many programmes in South Sudan are either designed without having done a thorough conflict analysis at the design phase, or when it becomes clear that programmes are conflict blind or contribute to conflict, agencies and donors are reluctant to make the necessary changes. A problem that is hardly unique to South Sudan, as noted by Dominic Naish based on his experience working as a researcher and analyst for humanitarian organizations: '[m]any international NGOs now

²⁶ Jon Bennett et al., op. cit., p.146

²⁷ Jon Bennett et al., op. cit., p.146

²⁸ Jon Bennett et al., op. cit., p.xx-xxi

²⁹ The creation of the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility in 2016 was largely the result of the increased awareness of the need for contextual analysis and to incorporate conflict sensitivity in donor strategies and programming following the outbreak of the war in December 2013.

³⁰ Sara Pantuliano, 'Donor-Driven Technical Fixes Failed South Sudan: It's Time to Get Political,' Think Africa Press, 9 January 2014, available at <https://thinkafricapress.com/donor-driven-technical-fixes-failed-time-put-politics-heart-nation-building-project-kiir-machar-garang/>

hire conflict analysts, research or advocacy specialists or humanitarian affairs officers to work in country offices... not only was contextual sensitivity low, but there was little sense that this was an issue... humanitarian country missions are not required to understand the contexts they work in. They are required to implement. Understanding is a bonus.³¹

The bias toward implementation is understandable since there are substantial unmet humanitarian needs in South Sudan. Also, the fact that donor and senior INGO staff are often rotated in on short-term cycles leaves them little time to understand South Sudan's complex operating context before they head off to their next posting. This leads many senior-level staff to have an ahistorical view of South Sudan and to concentrate on the technical aspects of their work, often justifying their lack of contextual knowledge on the questionable claim that humanitarian action is apolitical.

The international actors' ahistorical and apolitical approach to their engagement with South Sudan has also been encouraged by South Sudan's leaders, best exemplified by the narrative prevailing during the CPA years that South Sudan was a 'tabula rasa.' An expression used by President Kiir himself in a speech a couple of weeks after independence in which he declared that "the Republic of South Sudan is like a white paper –tabula rasa!"³²

The image of South Sudan as a 'tabula rasa' overlooked the inherently political nature of state-building enterprise funded by donors. It implied a vacuum that needed to be filled with state institutions and capacity building, and allowed programmes to focus on the transfer of technical expertise to newly established Government of Southern Sudan, which was generally perceived as distinct from the impure business of politics.³³ By focusing on the technical aspects of state-building, the international community overlooked the existence of deeply-rooted ideas of power and governance expressed through diverse and rich forms of political organization within South Sudanese communities.³⁴ It also overlooked the fact that the SPLM/A had set up its own administrative structures in the areas under its control during the Second Sudanese Civil War, as well as the legacy of the Sudanese state and how its exercise of power and government authority had informed South Sudanese leaders own ideas on the role of state and its relationship with its citizens.³⁵

The belief that building the new state apparatus was merely a technocratic enterprise was blind to the fact that the allocation of resources to build state institutions and capacities inevitably translated into the dispensation of material, coercive, and symbolic resources to those who controlled those institutions.³⁶ South Sudanese leaders found creative ways of encouraging international partners to

³¹ Dominic Naish, 'Not a priority: the lack of contextual understanding in humanitarian missions,' Humanitarian Practice Network, 2021, available at <https://odihpn.org/blog/not-a-priority-the-lack-of-contextual-understanding-in-humanitarian-missions/>

³² Available at <https://paanluelwel.com/2011/07/31/president-kiirs-speech-in-the-6th-martyrs-day-30-7-2011/>

³³ Wolfram Lacher, 'South Sudan: International State-Building and its Limits,' Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Research Paper N°4, 2012, available at https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2012_RP04_lac.pdf

³⁴ See, Edward Thomas, op. cit., chapter 2; Douglas H. Johnson, 'Federalism in the History of South Sudanese Political Thought,' in Luka Biong Deng Kuol and Sarah Logan (Eds.) *The Struggle for South Sudan*, I.B. Tauris, 2019; and Cherry Leonardi, *Dealing with Government in South Sudan: Histories of Chiefship, Community and State*, James Currey, 2013.

³⁵ Øsyste Rolandsen, *Guerilla Government: Political Changes in the Southern Sudan during the 1990s*, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2005.

³⁶ The CPA years were a textbook example of the practice of extraversion coined by Jean-François Bayart. African rulers, Bayart argues, compensate the scarce resources at their disposal to ensure their hold to power through the deliberate use of strategies that he called "extraversion," that is, by mobilizing the resources that they can secure from their linkages to the rest of the world. The key to extraversion is that African leaders use those external resources for their own goals, rather than for those of the external actors who make those resources available. See Jean-François Bayart, "Africa in the World: A History of Extraversion," *African Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 395, 2000.

overlook the political nature of the enterprise. Deviations from the professed objective of establishing a democratic and accountable state were presented as ‘hiccups,’ best exemplified by the metaphor used by South Sudanese politicians at the time of independence that ‘South Sudan is like a little baby that is learning how to walk.’³⁷ This narrative left many in the international community unprepared for the events of December 2013, the civil war that followed, and the challenges that they faced in getting South Sudanese leaders to agree to end the conflict and implement the agreements they had signed.

More generally, the donor community has been generally unwilling to engage in discussions on how aid intersects with South Sudan’s political economy. During the CPA years, oil revenue supplanted aid as the keystone of South Sudan’s economy and provided South Sudanese leaders ample funds to build patronage networks. Following the oil shutdown and subsequent economic collapse, aid overtook oil as the keystone of South Sudan’s economy.³⁸

A handful of important studies looked at the complex ways that aid was central to South Sudan’s political economy during the Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) period.³⁹ Unfortunately, no comparable studies have been undertaken since 2013, in spite of the parallels between the OLS years and the present with regards to aid’s role in sustaining affected populations and the penchant for conflict actors to manipulate aid to further their own interests.⁴⁰ An attempt was made to fill this vacuum with a private circulation paper released in 2018 that sought to open a discussion on the unintended consequences of humanitarian aid in South Sudan.⁴¹ Some donors attempted to engage with its recommendations. However, the paper generated a strong response from others who feared that public discussions on how aid contributed to conflict in South Sudan could lead to funding cuts.⁴² Although there were some subsequent efforts to take the conversation forward, they remained sporadic, and the paper has been largely shelved.

³⁷ In interviews conducted by the author in Juba, Bentiu, Malakal, Bor, and Torit between March and August 2011, national, state, and county-level officials used the ‘little baby’ metaphor to justify the country’s missteps such as corruption, the prevalence of violence, or internal SPLM scuffles.

³⁸ For the fiscal year 2021/22, the Government of South Sudan’s national budget was USD 1.87 billion, compared to the USD 2.11 billion net Official Development Assistance (ODA) to South Sudan. Figures for South Sudan’s budget are from David Mayen, ‘[South Sudan’s Cabinet approves amended \\$2.7 billion budget](#)’, *The East African*, 6 June 2022; ODA figures are from OECD, https://public.tableau.com/views/OECDACAidataglacebyrecipient_new/Recipients?:embed=y&:display_count=yes&:show_tabs=y&:toolbar=no?&:showVizHome=no, accessed 18 September 2023

³⁹ See for example David Keen, *The Benefits of Famine: A Political Economy of Famine and Relief in Southwestern Sudan, 1983-1989*, Princeton University Press, 1994; African Rights, *Food and Power in Sudan: A Critique of Humanitarianism*, 1999, available at <https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/wp-content/uploads/1997/01/Food-And-Power-In-Sudan-A-Critique-of-Humanitarianism.pdf>; and Mark Duffield et. Al., ‘Sudan: Unintended Consequences of Humanitarian Assistance, A Report to the European Community Humanitarian Office,’ University of Dublin, 2000, available at <https://sudanarchive.net/?a=is&oid=LD20000400-01&type=staticpdf&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN----->

⁴⁰ A handful of studies are nevertheless worth mentioning, in particular Majak D’Agoot et al., ‘The Politics of Humanitarianism: Perspectives from South Sudan,’ Conflict Research Programme, LSE, 2018, available at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100228/1/D_Agoot_Politics_of_humanitarianism_Published.pdf; and Lauren Hutton, ‘Aid and Government: Conflict sensitivity and the state in South Sudan,’ Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, 2018, available at <https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/CSRF-Research-Aid-and-Government.pdf>

⁴¹ USIP and ODI, ‘The Unintended Consequences of Humanitarian Action in South Sudan: Headline Findings,’ private circulation paper, January 2018.

⁴² The timing of the release of this paper was unfortunate, as the Trump administration was seen by many aid actors as hostile to international aid in general, and African countries in particular. There was the feared that the paper could be used to justify cuts to aid. The two strongest responses came from InterAction and the South Sudan NGO Forum. See Interaction, ‘A response to ‘The Unintended Consequences of Humanitarian Action in South Sudan: Headline Findings,’ April 2018, and South Sudan NGO Forum, ‘South Sudan NGO Forum response to the USIP/ODI paper: Unintended consequences of humanitarian action in South Sudan,’ May 2018.

The resistance to engage in this discussion in a context like South Sudan's, where a forty-year-old humanitarian response has unquestionably had complex social, economic, and political transformational effects demonstrates the reluctance of international actors to use a *longue durée* perspective when thinking about the impact of their presence in the country. To a large extent, this is the result of an uncritical application of the impartiality principle of humanitarian action. The creed that aid should be delivered *whenever and wherever* needs exist independently of any other considerations hinders the ability of humanitarians to fully comprehend the full impact that aid has on the communities in which they work and how aid can reinforce existing inequalities and marginalization. Such a narrow interpretation of humanitarian work can lead humanitarians to overlook the negative impact that aid has on relationships between community members or between communities.

It can also lead them to underestimate how aid can inadvertently contribute to conflict, or even worse, how aid can be manipulated by conflict actors. A problem that can become particularly serious when, as it is often the case, local, state, or national actors manipulate the targeting and/or the distribution of aid without international aid actors being aware.⁴³ As Joshua Craze and Alicia Luedke rightfully observed, 'rather than taking refuge in purely needs-based interpretations of impartiality..., the humanitarian community can commit to a more expansive agenda, in which its existing principles are complemented by a concern for social injustice and redressing structural inequalities – the real motors of conflict in places like South Sudan. Conflict sensitivity – understanding how aid, politics, and conflict become entangled – will help humanitarians navigate and minimise the unintended consequences of their assistance.'⁴⁴

Given that humanitarian aid will arguably continue to be a pillar of South Sudan's political economy for decades, the question of the ways in which aid has fuelled conflict since 2013 needs to be comprehensively examined. If donors and agencies are truly committed to the 'do no harm' principle, a thorough study of the ways in which aid has directly and indirectly fuelled South Sudan's conflicts is imperative.

This would require a radical change from the limited historical perspective that many international actors working in South Sudan currently have. This historical amnesia is not always deliberate, as donors and aid agencies frequently fund a wide range of analyses and evaluations. Given the pressures of daily work and the bias in favour of implementation and technical expertise over contextual analysis or historical knowledge, these studies are often only read by a few. Crucially, the regular rotation of international staff in and out of South Sudan, especially of senior staff, poses a serious challenge to the capacity of those with the power to set policy and define programmatic priorities to understand the how aid might, in some instances, do harm in the short term, and, more generally, the ways in which aid affects South Sudanese society in the mid- and long-term.

A recently published evaluation of the Dutch government's programming in fragile contexts characterized the regular rotation of staff in and out of Dutch missions as "annual lobotomies."⁴⁵ The

⁴³ For example, support to 'hubs of stability' under the Partnership for Resilience and Recovery was embraced by many donors without realising that the majority of these 'hubs' were in areas that were aligned with the SPLM-In Government. Targeted areas included Yambio, Torit, Bor, Aweil, Rumbek and Wau.

⁴⁴ Joshua Craze and Alicia Luedke, 'Why humanitarians should stop hiding behind impartiality,' *The New Humanitarian*, 22 August 2022, available at <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2022/08/22/impartiality-humanitarian-aid-South-Sudan-conflict>

⁴⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, "Inconvenient Realities: An evaluation of Dutch contributions to stability, security and rule of law in fragile and conflict-affected contexts," August 2023, p.45, available at <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/f51db0fc-b113-40f2-a589-bbafb755297f/file>

challenge, of course, is not limited to the Dutch or other donors, since it also impacts senior-level positions of all major INGOs and UN agencies. The high rotation of staff, combined with organisational cultures that measure performance based on the number of projects that are implemented, the budgets that are mobilized, or the number of people reached inhibit organisational learning and discourage senior managers from ensuring that conflict analysis underlies all programming decisions. In these equations, the long-term impact of programmes on the South Sudanese population is simply missing.

Conclusion

Released six months before South Sudan's independence, *Aiding the Peace* challenged some of the core assumptions that underlaid international engagement during the CPA years: the fact that with the signing of the CPA, South Sudan had transitioned to a 'post-conflict' stage; the belief that improved service delivery represented a 'peace dividend' that would disincentivise conflict; and that technical approaches could solve South Sudan's challenges, leading many to overlook the deeply political nature of the problems that South Sudan faced.

The outbreak of the civil war in December 2013 confirmed that the assumption that the country had moved to a post-conflict phase had been reached too hastily. Similarly, although some rushed to celebrate the arrival of 'peace' following the signing of the ARCSS in August 2015, the resumption of conflict in July 2016 stressed once again the importance of avoiding falling into the trap of thinking using discrete categories of 'war' and 'peace.' An observation that was once again reaffirmed by the prevalence of violence in many parts of the country following the signature of the R-ARCSS in September 2018. South Sudan's transition to 'peace' remains elusive, and although peace agreements are undeniably important in putting an end to open hostilities between the main warring parties, they rarely fundamentally alter the country's political economy and the main drivers of conflict.

The second key contribution of *Aiding the Peace*, that is, that improved public services is not a deterrent to violence, continues to be as valid today as it was during the CPA years. The hypothesis has been debunked by the violence seen across the county since 2013. Although having access to services is important to South Sudanese, the main driver of conflict in South Sudan was –and continues to be– fundamentally political. As the authors of *Aiding the Peace* correctly pointed out, improved governance and addressing political and economic marginalisation are the real peace dividends that will tackle drivers of conflict in South Sudan.

Finally, the belief that state-building and service provision were simply 'technical' problems that needed to be addressed, rooted in the illusion that South Sudan was a 'tabula rasa,' prevented the recognition of the deeply political nature of both endeavours. The outbreak of the civil war in December 2013 forced international actors to reconsider this assumption, and there has been an increased awareness of the importance of conflict analysis and conflict sensitivity in programme design and implementation. However, the preponderance of delivery over understanding the impact of programming decisions on political, economic and social factors continues. The focus on the technical aspects of programmes has often led to instances where the lack of understanding of South Sudan's political economy encouraged programme decisions that have empowered the very same authorities who created a system of governance that drove conflict in the first place.

International engagement in South Sudan continues to be based on the faith of the transformative power of peace agreements. However, the R-ACRSS has led to the methodical disruption of local governance structures and reinforced the extreme centralization of power in the hands of the Juba

elites. The embrace of the R-ARCSS as ‘the only game in town’ has precluded understanding the ways in which the implementation of the R-ARCSS has actually undermined wider efforts to build peace in the country.

There are simply no shortcuts for aiding the peace in South Sudan, which has a long and complex history. Signing peace agreements or holding elections are important milestones, but upending a system of governance built on the hyper-centralization of power and resources and on the political and economic marginalization of the population at large will take more than that. Peace agreements and elections should not be mistaken for the end of the process, which will inevitably take time. It will be first and above all South Sudanese who will find the answers, building from their own traditions, and their own ideas of power, governance, and peace. International actors will be able to help push in the right direction only if they become more engaged with and cognizant of South Sudan’s history and more willing to understand the mid- and long-term impacts of their presence in the country.

Recommendations

Organizations should invest in educating their expatriate staff in South Sudan’s context. The challenges affecting South Sudan are not new, but due to the high rotation of international staff, the pressures of daily work, and the emphasis on the technical dimensions of programming over contextual analysis, many international staff arrive with little knowledge of South Sudan or are quickly overwhelmed by its complexity. This problem is especially prominent at the senior level. There are a number of courses on South Sudan’s history and context available, such as those offered by the Rift Valley Institute or the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility South Sudan Course. Attending such a course should be required of all new senior managers as part of their orientation/onboarding.

There is a need to review the humanitarian response’s architecture to decentralize resources and decision-making authority to staff and offices at the state and county levels. The South Sudanese state is hyper-centralised, and the humanitarian response in South Sudan since 2013 has mirrored and exacerbated the extreme centralization of power and resources in Juba. As recommended by the 2021 Peer-to-Peer evaluation of the South Sudan humanitarian response, concrete steps towards decentralizing the response are needed. The humanitarian system, where the Juba-based national Clusters and Humanitarian Country Team are often the main decision-making bodies, reinforces this centralisation and the disempowerment and marginalization of the South Sudanese population. There are efforts to decentralise decision making, using the Area-based programming model, and this should be continued. To support this, donors and international agencies should review their own management and incentive structures to empower and attract the most qualified international and national staff to field locations outside of Juba. This may mean that operational decision making, budgetary allocations, and staffing policies will need to be reviewed and adjusted.

Given the high turnover of international staff, donor and aid agencies should invest in training South Sudanese staff to serve as conflict and humanitarian analysts, and then be willing to listen and action the advice they provide. While there are some international staff who have a deep understanding of the complexities of the South Sudan context, South Sudanese themselves are better placed to be conflict and humanitarian analysts. South Sudanese often have more in-depth knowledge of their local contexts, the historical roots of conflict, and many have an encyclopedic understanding of the political economy of aid in South Sudan. Local dynamics in South Sudan are complex and require a level of microanalysis that remains too elusive for most international staff, even those with many years of in-country experience. Donors should insist that sufficient resources are allocated to support the professional development of South Sudanese staff interested in taking up such roles.

Be willing to have open, honest conversations about the unintended consequences of humanitarian aid and take the necessary steps to address them. After forty years of an uninterrupted humanitarian response, and especially since the economic crisis that followed the 2012 oil shutdown and the outbreak of the civil war in 2013, humanitarian aid has become a fundamental pillar of South Sudan's political economy. In spite of this, attempts at launching a discussion on the unintended consequences of humanitarian aid have been shunned. There are many factors that inhibit having such an open and honest conversation, such as reputational risks for the organizations involved and fears of funding cuts. This reluctance to reflect on and acknowledge past mistakes often results in the same mistakes being repeated. Not learning from the past is expensive, as approaches that have not worked in the past are tried again. The aid community should establish mechanisms to openly reflect on how past actions may have undermined peacebuilding efforts, how conflict-blind development projects have exacerbated tensions between communities, or when the targeting for humanitarian assistance has fuelled conflict or eroded a sense of community. In light of the increasing demands on aid budgets worldwide, it is imperative that aid actors in South Sudan engage in this discussion to limit harm whenever applicable and to more effectively use all funding available to further the aspirations of all South Sudanese.