

International support for civil society involvement in peacemaking in South Sudan

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The importance of civil society involvement in peace processes is increasingly recognised. Yet providing effective support to civil society can be challenging for bilateral and multilateral donors, United Nations (UN) agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) alike. Space for civil society in conflict-affected societies is often, and increasingly, contested and constricted. In many conflicts, fractures within civil society mirror the societal fault lines that underpin the violence.

The South Sudan peace process has often been cynically characterised as a negotiation between two sides seeking to 'divide up the cake' of available rents and resources. The inclusion of civil society in the process has helped both to broaden the issues raised at the negotiation table, and to ensure that wider society is more aware of and engaged in it, including South Sudanese refugees. This article focuses on the efforts by international actors in South Sudan to support civil society and the mixed results thus far. It touches on the difficulties of coordination, representation, and legitimacy – perennial challenges in peace processes.

Civil society and different dialogue 'tracks'

Support for civil society engagement in peace processes varies enormously. It spans practical assistance, such

as technical support and guidance, subject-specific training and comparative insights gained through study tours or examples of civil society engagement; campaigns, research and advocacy; funding or logistical assistance for workshops and other activities; organisational development support, and much more.

Invoking the concept of multi-track diplomacy, civil society can engage in multiple dialogue 'tracks' in peace processes: formal 'track one' talks between states and conflict parties, and less formal talks, such as 'track two' involving social leaders and influencers, or 'track three' at much more local and grassroots levels. Civil society's experiences of different dialogue tracks in South Sudan has been varied. Its involvement in track one negotiations over the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS, 2015) and the Revitalised ARCSS (R-ARCSS, 2018) has ebbed and flowed. This inconsistency has resulted partly from varying levels of external support, partly from the realities of the exclusive and high-level approach to formal talks, and partly from the level of openness of individual mediators over time.

Track two processes have enjoyed greater donor support with more flexibility and variety, which has helped ensure local civil society receives timely funding support, though

this is often fragmented and rarely sustained. Links between formal and informal peace initiatives are developed in track two processes, which are vital to help mobilise and engage a broader set of stakeholders with different types of influence and access. Track three processes in South Sudan are generally sporadic and under-resourced and features more limited opportunities for civil society involvement. This is affirmed in research by Christian Aid that notes international support for local-level peace initiatives in South Sudan are inconsistently connected 'upwards' to sub-national or national level, and are typically not supported sustainably.

Representation and legitimacy

Legitimate representation is an ever-present challenge for civil society in South Sudan, as in other conflict zones. This difficulty is especially stark in the early phases of peace support or in periods of collapse, when competition for influence amongst civil society actors is more pronounced and when mechanisms for cooperation and coordination are nascent or perhaps at their weakest. Identifying 'legitimate' civil society in the early phases of peace processes is difficult for external actors, often operating to short timeframes in situations of emergency and are likely to have limited local networks. This means that external actors may need to make difficult decisions whether to settle for limited civil society representation if it is not possible to engage more diverse or less accessible civil society.

Organised violence and repressive public policy shrink space for civic engagement, and few actors can openly or officially engage in peacemaking. Less structured civil society entities are often less able to mitigate risks of engaging in dialogue and are more likely to be squeezed out, regardless of their legitimacy, competency, credentials or expertise. Seemingly mundane issues affect civil society's representation and influence, from English language skills and access to passports, to being known among external actors.

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External support can tend to favour 'low-hanging fruit' – the more organised and accessible civil society entities that external actors can more quickly and easily engage with. This typically pivots on an urban bias and a focus on NGOs over smaller community organisations. Furthermore, the types of local entity deemed eligible for donor support – directly from a donor or sub-contracted via an INGO or the UN –

tend to be those that can spend and account for funds, and have the requisite organisational development to manage reporting, monitoring and evaluation requirements. External actors also often look to national civil society actors, operating in alliances, as stand-alone organisations or as individuals, to represent the authentic 'voice' of civil society – and by extension constituencies of the broader population.

One manifestation of legitimacy concerns is when individuals active in peace promotion are accused of becoming detached from key perspectives, priorities, and interests, especially beyond capitals or major towns. Peace talks are often held outside of the conflict-affected region, and in-country or diaspora elites may be unfairly advantaged due to language skills, location, and access to passports and visas. Local perceptions that peace processes are exclusive run the risk of being reinforced. This has been the case in South Sudan.

Support for civil society peacemaking can also suffer from challenges of reductionism or tokenism, for example in relation to the Women, Peace and Security agenda where over-emphasis on *numbers* of women involved in events has become both conflated with, and displaced efforts to facilitate, meaningful participation and women's abilities to seize opportunities, set and shape agendas, and influence outcomes. This presents further costs for the participants themselves. In South Sudan, support for civil society is typically over-reliant on a comparatively small circle of English-speaking, urban-based women, who as a result suffer exhaustion from multiple demands, diminished credibility and isolation from their constituencies.

Coordination and competition

Coordination during periods of peace process collapse or pre-formal periods can be challenging for donors, INGOs and the UN. It takes time that may not be available early in a peace process, while coordination models from other sectors like the humanitarian cluster system are not necessarily easily transferrable. In times of peace process collapse and crisis coordination, donor attention and engagement also oscillate, reducing the time and appetite for coordination on one hand, while also potentially reducing the 'space' and opportunities for donors to support relevant initiatives.

Groups of Friends and Multi-Donor Trust Fund mechanisms in South Sudan have struggled to enhance complementarity in practice and have often been limited to facilitating internal conversations about what and who members are respectively supporting alongside tensions about credit and attribution. While such information-sharing shows willingness to coordinate, some donors are not yet fully comfortable with ceding influence, intellectual property and transparency to enable greater levels of collaboration and such forums



Billboard with South Sudan President Salva Kiir Mayardit advertising the National Dialogue process, Wau, 1 February 2020. © Tony Karumba/AFP via Getty Images

can struggle to secure a strategic division of labour in support of civil society actors' aspirations and priorities.

The High-Level Revitalization Forum for South Sudan (HLRF) illustrates the challenges of intra-civil society competition combined with poor donor engagement. The HLRF was established under the aegis of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in June 2017 to bolster the moribund 2015 ARCSS. The HLRF mandate sought to restore a permanent ceasefire and to implement the ARCSS.

During the early phases of the HLRF, numerous South Sudanese civil society organisations and alliances were funded by different donors to engage with the African Union and with the IGAD Special Envoy to South Sudan, Ambassador Ismail Wais. Drawing on different support from multiple donors, each organisation sought to establish itself as the 'genuine' voice of South Sudanese civil society, often without conferring. Wais met with multiple organisations purporting to represent the same constituency, often presenting contradictory perspectives. He implored South Sudanese civil society to engage in a more coordinated and coherent manner.

Looking ahead – indications of better practice

There are promising examples of international actors and civil society working together productively in South Sudan. Cooperation among a group of INGOs subcontracting to local organisations made it possible to support civil society in a flexible way, adjusting project-specific activities and resources towards joint activities or common priorities, ensuring greater transparency and adaptation to the needs, ideas, and interests of civil society actors themselves. This arrangement facilitated coordination, with some INGOs (effectively secondary donors) providing funding for travel,

while others supported specific activities or provided technical expertise. As a result, civil society actors were able to respond to emerging opportunities, including to travel and participate in regional talks, while also in turn helping to strengthen civil society cohesion.

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Representatives from the South Sudanese refugee community have been supported to participate in regional meetings on the peace process. Such direct engagement of refugee communities in peace negotiations is quite rare and, given the scale of the South Sudanese refugee population in neighbouring countries, ensured that a substantial section of South Sudanese society was represented in dialogue that would normally have excluded them.

In addition to the INGO mechanism noted above, some INGOs and government donors also regularly coordinate, share perspectives and adjust project timelines and activities to provide complementary and well-timed support, both as individual organisations and via the South Sudanese Civil Society Forum. Although the Forum is a formal body, the group of INGOs is quite informal and fluctuates slightly depending on which INGOs are most active at any time. The Forum is increasingly seen as the key platform for bringing together relevant civil society actors, including for the purposes of coordinating and aligning civil society engagement in peacemaking efforts.

The existence of the Forum has contributed to regular civil society participation, collaboration and cohesion through

agreement on the Forum's strategic priorities and on how its members can contribute to collective realisation of these priorities. In 2019, the Forum embarked on a strategic planning process which sought to leverage the key shared priorities of the member organisations. This has positioned the Forum to be more than an umbrella platform and to be able to move in a common direction when it comes to advocacy as well as activities. This could also potentially create a common entry point for donors to support the Forum and the work of its members, though this remains to be seen.

Conclusion and recommendations

In South Sudan there are many examples of rhetoric and policy commitments from international actors – whether in relation to localisation, conflict sensitivity, or the importance of civil society, especially women's engagement, in peace processes. Yet the inconsistency of concrete application undermines international intentions in support of civil society engagement. The incentives to compete for influence and visibility seem to be higher than those to collaborate. This has led to counterproductive consequences, exacerbating existing tensions within civil society and rendering the sum of efforts to support civil society less than its composite parts. While recognising the inherent tensions and difficulties of this task, not least in contexts where civil society dynamics mirror the complexity and divisions of the broader conflict at large, there are ways donors can adjust their behaviour both individually and collectively.

As argued elsewhere in this *Accord*, funding support to civil society needs to move above the activity and project level to include a pool of unearmarked funding providing CSOs and NGOs with the flexibility to seize opportunities and respond to emerging challenges and shifting circumstances. This could be tested with small budget lines that are unearmarked and spent following discussion with donors on emerging priorities. If these are not spent in a funding cycle, they could be converted to organisational development needs (eg strategic planning facilitation, supporting staff to participate in fee-based learning opportunities). This also relates to the need to provide sustained funding beyond any dialogue activities, and to enable, facilitate or encourage connections across and between tracks.

International actors can innovate in the ways we identify priorities for funding support. Donors including INGOs and the UN need to continue to prioritise finding ways to provide complementary and coordinated support that responds to the needs and priorities identified by civil society, not those pre-determined by external actors. This could involve more

active forms of consultation and soliciting of ideas. Some INGOs and UN actors (particularly political missions) are well-placed to convene and connect; if there is the political will to do so. Such outreach can also be complemented through social media polls, radio programming and talk shows, surveys and the like to tap into ideas beyond urban NGOs.

Smarter mapping of expertise can pinpoint up and coming as well as overlooked actors providing scope for support beyond the 'usual suspects' for funding support and learning opportunities. Collective and regularly updated mapping, now entirely possible through electronic tools, also cuts out the duplication and frayed will that constant mapping by international actors represents to many NGOs and CSOs. There are innovations to draw on such as the USAID-led electronic visualisation and mapping of women's expertise in Myanmar in 2018–19 (see further reading).

Many INGOs and UN agencies are uncomfortable with being regarded as donors. Yet trends in secondary contracting by these entities are well established. As such, those INGOs and UN entities involved in managing large grants and sub-contracting or spearheading consortia play a key role in shaping both the direction and the manner in which support is provided – the 'who' and the 'how'. Changes in practices from these agencies, from procurement to the way in which they interact with civil society actors on a personal basis, can have a big impact.

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Diverse civil society constituencies are essential for holding conflict parties to account and navigating new political realities particularly in the context of the shrinking political space for civil society. International actors can do more to support constituency-building alongside participation in peace processes. Participation support is vital but so too is longer and slower support for movement and alliance building. Nurturing such connections is an investment in civil society's role in the implementation of any agreements.

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of Oxfam.