

Key lessons learned on international engagement

Key messages

- The long history of international engagement in South Sudan has been driven and shaped at least as much by global aid trends as by the realities of the local context, norms and institutions.
- After the CPA and independence, international actors prioritised technical solutions to South Sudan's development challenges and failed to adequately account for the deeply political nature of conflict transformation, state-building and aid.
- Renewed warfare led to a shift in aid priorities from state-building to humanitarian action, and thus in coordination from central institutions to local authorities, yet international engagement remained too detached from local contexts and perspective.

Background

The SLRC South Sudan programme has been working since 2012 to identify and understand the realities of livelihoods, access to basic services, and perceptions of governance in post-independence South Sudan. In 2013, SLRC conducted research in Uror, Nyirol, and Pibor counties to examine the dynamics of service delivery, state-building and livelihood changes in the context of armed conflict and raiding. Following the outbreak of large-scale armed conflict in December 2013, the research was adjusted to reflect the shift in the focus aid towards humanitarian action.

This briefing paper summarises findings from the publications of SLRC South Sudan over the life of the programme, all of which can be found at: www.securelivelihoods.org/South-Sudan.

International engagement in South(ern) Sudan: A long history

The history of what is now South Sudan is also a history of external intervention, broadly including: colonialism under Turco-Egyptian (1821-1899) and Anglo-Egyptian Condominium rule (1899-1955); rule by a succession of mostly Islamist governments in Khartoum (1955-2011); large-scale humanitarian operations during the 1990s and 2000s; and unprecedented donor support and investment in 'state-building' around the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and South Sudan's independence in July 2011. SLRC research explores the evolution of engagement

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of mainly Western actors in humanitarian, development and state-building programmes leading up to and following independence.¹

Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), which ran from 1989 until the signing of the CPA, was at the time the world's largest-ever coordinated humanitarian relief operation. It was the first humanitarian operation to negotiate access to deliver relief inside an active conflict zone, by way of the 'Ground Rules' agreements signed with the Government of Sudan in Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), the dominant armed group in the south. OLS operated throughout the rest of the civil war, using various aid delivery channels to varying degrees of success. After the CPA, large-scale aid did not end so much as shift focus: although some emergency relief continued, aid agencies and donors shifted their resources and rhetoric towards conflict recovery and development – the state-building agenda – in the newly independent South Sudan.

Tremendous effort and donor resources have gone into aid and institution-building in the emerging country. Yet, with the re-emergence of armed conflict since December 2013, South Sudan's history of large-scale armed violence and humanitarian crisis now appears to be repeating itself.

Global trends, not local developments, drive aid decisions

Just as the OLS period offered new opportunities for aid providers to improve on their past experiences in the Horn

1 Other forms of international engagement – i.e. the engagement of neighbouring and regional actors, including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, or of non-Western donors and trade partners such as China and Turkey, or investment from the oil industry and other investors – are not the focus of SLRC research.

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of Africa and elsewhere, the period after the CPA and independence offered similar openings for new approaches. South Sudan was viewed by many as a clean slate on which to test a number of new aid and coordination modalities. The country came into being at the same time as the New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States and, like that agreement, was viewed by many in the aid world as a new chance to make up for aid mistakes of the past, including shortfalls in funding and coordination, lack of support to central institutions, an overly technical approach and over-emphasis on the views of external actors. The New Deal instead emphasises country leadership and ownership of development agendas, though as the South Sudan case has painfully illustrated, it does not contain back-up plans for response to a failure of that model.

Donors to the emerging nation-state pursued core support to ministries and government departments along with new aid coordination mechanisms on an unprecedented scale. Many of these programmes fell short of their objectives. The joint mechanisms, including the Joint Donor Team, the Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) and others were never fully supported in terms of either financial resources or political commitment, and were bypassed altogether by those donors with a preference for bilateral aid, principally the United States. When the MDTF formally closed in mid-2013 after seven years of operation, many of the projects had failed to meet their targets, largely due to operational constraints and inefficiencies as well as poor coordination and underfunding.²

The commitment to the New Deal spurred donors to support South Sudanese-led efforts, but it is unclear whether those external actors had concrete plans for recognising and

2 Fafo (2013) Independent Evaluation of the Multi-Donor Trust Fund – South Sudan (MDTF-SS), Final Report. 25 July 2013. Juba: Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies.

addressing the potential pitfalls of working with nascent government institutions or even the longer-standing institutions that had metamorphosed during the civil war. The problems included the slow pace of change in systems and staff capacity, as well as the potential for corruption or a slide back into conflict. With the descent into armed violence after December 2013, many donors became reluctant to work closely with the South Sudanese government. Thus, the donor response to South Sudan's return to war illustrates a crucial lack of planning for the possibility that New Deal countries might return to conflict.

Moreover, international donors and other actors often did not effectively incorporate the plethora of South Sudanese institutions beyond the state, including NGOs, civil society, and traditional socio-political structures and individuals, many of which were already working on a variety of governance, relief and development initiatives. As our research has repeatedly shown, many of these were ignored in favour of international agencies and NGOs, while others were funded too optimistically. In the rush to distribute funds, some donors tended to prioritise those recipients who could meet their complex financing and reporting structures, regardless of other issues or criteria. This gap led to wrong assumptions, competition for funding, and almost certainly to the misuse of aid funds for patronage and personal enrichment. These practices continued despite donor-funded analyses pointing to many of these risks, which suggests that such analyses were under-utilised.

Technical solutions won't fix political problems

Despite the fact that the New Deal emphasises the political aspects of post-conflict recovery, many donors and international agencies failed to adequately consider the complexity and deeply political nature of South Sudan. Instead, most of the numerous aid projects approached the newly independent South Sudan with only fairly narrow technical solutions to its many problems. For example, multiple agencies were working to address armed conflict related to cattle, a critical problem in several states in the new country. Some programmes operated on implicit assumptions that cattle raiding and related fighting were mainly based on resource scarcity, particularly over grazing land and access to water. The realities, however, were much more complicated: in the case of Jonglei State – the locus of most of SLRC research – conflict and raiding stemmed from multiple intersecting drivers including national political dynamics, political contestation within the state, competition between different age sets³, bride wealth and the demonstration of power and material wealth – of which cattle are an important manifestation. No single technical project-based approach, be it agricultural investment or localised infrastructure construction, could adequately address the underlying political dimensions.

³ Age sets are a key social category for some ethnic groups, creating a shared identity among people of similar age within the larger group.

South Sudanese respondents also criticised development projects as isolated, piecemeal, and unsustainable. Numerous schools, clinic facilities and boreholes were built, for example, without a realistic plan for government institutions to assume responsibility for their sustained operation. Functional institutions require ongoing staffing, training and procurement processes, dedicated and stable budgets and budget management infrastructure; yet, in much of South Sudan, there was a dearth of local capacity and, in some cases political will. In retrospect it is clear that institution-building was going to be a complex, long-term process, but it's not clear that international actors – or perhaps more importantly, the budget cycles to which they were beholden – incorporated a realistic view of the challenges that were likely to arise along the way.

Furthermore, setting priorities and planning and allocating funding are highly political endeavours, as these processes relate to control of resources, governance and accountability. Programmes engaging with these political aspects – for instance, by supporting political dialogue, governance, budgetary accountability and civic education – exist in South Sudan, but they are inherently slow processes and their impact is difficult to measure. As such, they are often at odds with many donors' need to be able to prove that aid money is well-spent. 'Value', in this context, is very difficult to define, much less quantify.

Real participation remains out of reach for most South Sudanese

A corollary concern to the overemphasis on technical development projects, voiced by respondents both before and after the resumption of armed conflict, is that communities have only rarely been involved in decision-making about their needs and priorities. Many projects implemented in South Sudan since the CPA era seemed to have their conceptual origins everywhere but in the communities intended to benefit from them. Instead, 'best practices' were brought in from other countries, or programmes were devised in Juba. While it is obviously more expedient to bring in a preconceived (and funded) project, a central problem of this approach is that it risks addressing the wrong issues or directing resources away from those most in need. In addition, the longevity of programmes seems entirely reliant upon donor funding cycles and has little to do with their success or community feedback. Many respondents, particularly those in remote areas, seemed generally baffled by the capriciousness of the aid their communities received, in terms of its utter lack of connection to local needs, perceptions, or the rhythms of livelihoods.

SLRC research consistently noted that the opportunity for community 'participation' and input into government or NGO programmes since the CPA was limited – even in best-case scenarios – to being informed and perhaps having chiefs and other local authorities help to direct targeting of predetermined interventions. Only approximately 15% of respondents in Jonglei and 20% in Upper Nile reported in 2012 that they were 'satisfied' with planning processes around basic services. Our research found that relations between international

actors and local authorities have reportedly grown closer since the renewal of conflict – at the same time as those with central state institution have soured – yet these seem to remain largely in the service of aid delivery rather than its design. Authorities and their constituents still lack systematic opportunities to participate in broader needs assessments, which has a real impact on programme design and operation.

Conclusions and implications

South Sudan and the international actors involved with it once again find themselves at a crossroads, with a transitional government in flux, strained relations between major donors and the UN with the government, a contested peace agreement, tremendous displacement of the population, and ever-increasing humanitarian needs in a very challenging and increasingly insecure working environment. It is a time to pay close attention to the lessons emerging from many years of international engagement in South(ern) Sudan.

The importance of adapting international engagement to the context – as proclaimed by the New Deal – requires multiple mechanisms that would structure that engagement quite differently from the past. International actors must have access to rigorous historical, political and contextual analyses. They must have adequate means, incentives, space and time to understand those analyses and apply them to their ongoing activities. It also calls for adequate knowledge management mechanisms to ensure that lessons from previous periods such as OLS are not only produced, but truly learned, and that knowledge is transferred within the context of high personnel fluctuation.

Conflict transformation processes, state-building and international aid are highly political, and thus constrained by politics. In South Sudan, this could be done, for example, through a regular analysis of the political dynamics and the political economy of the ongoing armed conflict, and working with analysis in new ways to make sure it is utilised. It also requires critical reflection on the impact of international support itself on the political and conflict dynamics. More comprehensive monitoring and evaluation of international engagement on longer timescales should further enhance understandings of the interface between aid and conflict.

New modes of engagement – including ‘more local, more flexible, more responsive funding to local priorities’ and ‘more devolved authority to spend and spend quickly’⁴ – might make for engagement that is better adapted to the changing context and the priorities of the aid recipients. Implementing partners that work in this highly dynamic context would also benefit from more flexible approaches, with the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and redirect funding more quickly and smoothly.

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At the time of writing, the status of the peace agreement, the composition of Transitional Government of National Unity and the strategies of international actors are all very much in flux. In some ways, this situation is not new but rather a reiteration and continuation of past dynamics. Thus the conclusions and recommendations emerging from SLRC research are also not new. They take on renewed urgency, however, as there is no doubt that international actors will continue to be called upon to engage with the young independent state they so enthusiastically helped shepherd into existence. It is imperative that the mistakes of the past are not repeated (again).

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⁴ p. 36; Maxwell, D., Gordon, R., Moro, L., Santschi, M., and Dau, P. (2016) Trajectories of International Engagement with State and Local Actors. Working Paper 46. London: SLRC.