

Casting the net too deep and too wide?

UN local peacebuilding-peacekeeping nexus in South Sudan

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Summary

The UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan, UNMISS, is one of the most ambitious operations in UN history, in terms of local-level peacebuilding and the level of decentralization from the capital to its field offices. In the course of the next three years, UNMISS aims to establish a presence on the local level through 35 County Support Bases (CSBs) in the ten states of South Sudan. According to Hilde Johnson, UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and head of UNMISS, these will serve as 'a platform and a portal for local authorities',¹ as well as for humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors, to extend state authority and deliver services to the local population.

The level of ambition reflects the increasing acknowledgement within UN peacekeeping that peace must be built from below, through strengthening local institutions and delivering basic services, by including the voices of local populations and finding a balance between formal and traditional authorities. The question is whether the UN has the staying power, the bureaucratic flexibility required to operate at such levels, the ability to cooperate internally and with other actors and resources (human and financial), to follow this ambitious project through, and whether expectations will be fulfilled.

The divide between the centre and the periphery in the (old) Sudan has historically been very wide, and local institutional and non-institutional actors have barely been connected to the centre, let alone able to influence national decision-making.² This pattern is repeated in the new state of South Sudan. As the country is barely one year old, there is very little space for political opposition, and although some efforts have been made to decentralize power to the state level, only 16% of South Sudan's budget reaches the state governments.³ It should also be borne in mind that most officials on all levels in the government and administration have a history of active participation in the civil war, and very often as military officers in the SPLA. The military influence on the administration is massive; it will be a great challenge to change the combative and zero-sum mindset that pervades the current administration of South Sudan, towards a more conciliatory and inclusive approach to governance.

1 Interview with Hilde Johnson, SRSG UNMISS, Juba October 2011.
 2 For a good overall historical background of this marginalization see D. Johnson, 2011. *The root causes of Sudan's civil wars*, Oxford, James Currey.
 3 Sudan Tribune, *Only 16% of South Sudan's budget reaches state governments*, 25 May 2012. Available at: <http://www.sudantribune.com/Only-14-of-South-Sudan-s-budget,42701>.

This policy brief is based on a recent NUPI report on how the UN is undertaking local-level early peacebuilding, focusing on the efforts of the UN DPKO Civil Affairs (CA) section in South Sudan.⁴ The rationale for making the connection between Civil Affairs and local-level peacebuilding is grounded in the evolving understanding that 'peacekeepers are peacebuilders'⁵ and should implement early peacebuilding tasks.⁶ In peacekeeping missions, the Civil Affairs section is most frequently deployed throughout the host country, providing the UN with a presence on the local level.

The UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan is unique, as the first UN peacekeeping mission with an explicit and comprehensive peacebuilding mandate. The mandate has been carefully crafted so as not to put the main responsibility for peacebuilding on the UN. It states that that the UN should 'develop an early strategy in support of national peacebuilding priorities'⁷ which 'can deliver prioritized support that reflects the specific peacebuilding needs and priorities

4 Diana Felix da Costa and John Karlsrud (2012). 'Moving towards local-level peacebuilding?'. *Security in Practice* 5 • 2012. Oslo, NUPI.
 5 United Nations 2012. *Peace: Keep it. Build it. The Contribution of United Nations Peacekeeping to Early Peacebuilding: Strategy*. UN DPKO and DFS, New York: p. 10.
 6 As defined by the Secretary-General in his opening remarks of the Security Council discussion on peacebuilding, 13 October 2010 (UN 2010), where he stressed that peacekeeping missions should be enabled 'to have an impact as "early peacebuilders"'. The meeting in the Security Council was held to discuss the latest *Progress Report of the Secretary-General on peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict* (UN 2010).
 7 UNSC (2011) S/RES/1996. Available at: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/1996%282011%29.

of the Republic of South Sudan.⁸ The Civil Affairs section is present in all field locations, but in the set-up envisaged by the SRSG their responsibility will focus on the core tasks of conflict mitigation and political space. Reintegration, reconstruction and peacebuilding (RRP) officers will be responsible for enabling the CSBs to operate according to the vision of the SRSG.

As in many post-conflict countries, also in South Sudan the state is nearly entirely absent from rural areas, and there is a deep divide between centre and periphery. Until the country's recent independence, Juba was considered 'periphery' in relation to Khartoum, so it is hardly surprising that there are huge challenges involved in reducing the gap between the current political, administrative and economic centre – Juba – and the rest of the country. The concept of centre/periphery is also applicable to state capitals and the rest of their territories. The government is present at national and state levels, albeit with weak capacity. On the county level there is an almost total lack of state presence and infrastructure, while below the county level (*payam* and *boma*) only informal structures exist. The principle of decentralization has been more one of rhetoric than of action. Most power and resources are located in the centre – in Juba, and to a lesser extent at the state levels.

With some exceptions, most government authorities regarded the role of CA and UNMISS more broadly as providing logistical support and transport. This type of logistical support is critical in a country that is roughly the size of France yet has only 100 kilometres of paved roads⁹ – and the rainy season prevents most travel between state capitals and the rest of the territory. Civil Affairs use mission assets (like helicopters and boats) as their added-value, and as a tool for their peace facilitation and advisory work.

Civil Affairs are playing an important role in facilitating reconciliation and dialogue in South Sudan. While CA officers often remark that they frequently act as 'travel agents' facilitating travel for government officials at the local, state and national levels, their role should not be underestimated, as it enables officials to attend peace conferences and engage with local populations to hear their complaints and concerns. This is the first step towards building a relationship between the government and its people, with a participatory system of governance where the periphery is better linked up with the centre in a state.

UNMISS has a political mandate, and CA has the responsibility to execute this at the local level. Its work

focuses primarily on collection and analysis of information on localized conflict dynamics, and providing the government with logistical support 'in doing their job'. CA support focuses on practical aspects of conflict resolution, like providing transport to government officials and other relevant stakeholders such as representatives of Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) and local church organizations to peace conferences and related events in isolated parts of the country,¹⁰ as well as assisting in organizing those meetings, particularly in relation to conflict management. Yet, while CA information gathering and analysis skills were widely recognized and respected, there were many criticisms that these were not shared – sometimes not even within the mission, or with other UN agencies, civil society and government. Naturally, some analysis should remain internal, but there is a need to reflect on the benefits of better information among actors operating in the same complex environments. Programmes developed by government, UN agencies and NGOs would greatly benefit from the information analysis done by Civil Affairs.

While it is crucial for international actors to work side by side with the government, it is equally important that CA officers, and all other international actors operating on the local level, engage with customary authorities as well as emerging community-based organizations (CBOs), the local churches, youth, women and local civil society. In many instances, the influence of elders and traditional authorities has been weakened by the civil war. Government-appointed chiefs may also not be representative of their communities, so all UN officials and other partners must seek to understand the complex political economy and dynamics on state and local levels, to ensure that more good than harm is done.

Privileging relationships with institutional actors, as the UN tends to do, is not an easy task and can complicate or even prevent the organization from engaging with other stakeholders, be they opposition parties or rebel groups. Broad engagement is a necessary feature of CA work, and can be crucial to local-level development. In South Sudan, the governing party the SPLM seeks to maintain the leading position it gained through the struggle for independence. In reality there is as yet no viable political opposition – which can put the UN and CA in a difficult position. This is also reflected in challenges to the rule of law, including widespread impunity among SPLA soldiers, in addition to the appointment of local administrators recruited from the SPLA. It is not uncommon to hear of abuses

8 Ibid., p. 7.

9 International Monetary Fund 2011. South Sudan Faces Hurdles as World's Newest Country. Available at <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/survey/so/2011/caro71811a.htm> accessed 22 December 2011.

10 For a good study of how the UN can partner with religious actors and churches for local peacebuilding, see I.M. Breidlid and A. Stensland 2011. 'The UN Mission and Local Churches in South Sudan: Opportunities for Partnerships in Local Peacebuilding', *Conflict Trends*, 3/2011. Durban, ACCORD.

perpetrated by the SPLA themselves, contributing to a general sense of lawlessness and impunity.

Current UN risk-management practices and regulations severely restrict civilian peacekeepers' ability to engage meaningfully with their local government and civil society counterparts, as well as with the population at large. If UN missions are serious about having a role in local peacebuilding, then such practices need to be reviewed and become more flexible – for instance, through establishing security phases on local levels, instead of applying blanket approaches.

Establishing Country Support Bases across South Sudan

The CSBs are part of a very ambitious plan for further strengthening the presence of national authorities on the local level. Based on the principle of equality between international peacekeepers and national authorities, each of the CSBs will co-locate local authorities with the UN, sharing the same standards of buildings, internet access and facilities. These CSBs will also facilitate access for other partners within and outside the UN system, including civil society organizations (CSOs).

The CSBs carry a great promise to the local population, a promise that the mission would be wise to heed. Unless the presences can be paralleled with service delivery and can result in real peace dividends for local populations, the result may be anger and loss of confidence in peacekeepers and local authorities alike. The CSBs will thus be a prism through which to follow and measure how well the international community and the government in Juba are managing to instil the trust and confidence needed to achieve 'real' peacebuilding from the ground up in South Sudan. While all actors should have a sober vision about what the UN can realistically be expected to achieve with only a few CSBs in a country the size of France, the CSBs will clearly be an initiative that merits continued and careful scrutiny by the international and research communities alike.

Recommendations

1. UN Civil affairs and local-level engagement

- a. Consider embedding/co-locating CA officers in relevant state-level government offices, in coordination with the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and AECOM;¹¹
- b. Continue to support an inclusive dialogue with the political opposition;
- c. Encourage local government authorities to work with customary authorities, including inviting them to meetings, ceremonies and other events;

¹¹ AECOM, a US private company financed by USAID, has been engaged in peace work in South Sudan since 2007. For more see http://www.aecom.com/Where+We+Are/Africa/_projectsList/Sudan+Transition+Initiative.

- d. Make use of local CBOs and CSOs to reach out to the population and the village level.

2. How to help local actors to influence national decision-making processes?

- a. Press for a more participatory approach in national decision-making organs and politicians, through the SRSG on the strategic level and CA officers on the operational and tactical levels;
- b. Ensure that the CSBs contribute to feeding local voices into national policy processes, including youth, civil society and customary authorities;
- c. Continue and expand the cooperation between the UNDP and CA on the Community Security and Arms Control¹² consultations, and use the presence of the CSBs to expand these to the county level as well.

3. The UN and local peacebuilding – moving from civil affairs to County Support Bases (CSBs)

- a. Share the baseline study undertaken in the *payams* with civil society and other development actors to get their inputs and to enable programming for local-level peacebuilding and development;
- b. Ensure close cooperation in CSBs and on state and national levels between CA and the RRP section/ UN country team;
- c. The CSBs should be externally evaluated after the first year of operation to improve value for money, effectiveness and ownership among local stakeholders, and to remedy possible unintended consequences;
- d. Review the implications of the transfer of quick impact projects (QIPs) from CA to the RRP officers after one year, in terms of effectiveness, comparative advantages and possible unintended consequences.

4. Promoting local ownership – the recurring challenge

- a. Continuously consider and reflect on questions of legitimacy of local actors
- b. Involve the youth, as well as other groups such as elders and women, in peace conferences and events, as well throughout the entire long-term follow-up process
- c. Continue the decentralized mission agenda that empowers local CA teams to operate contextually and flexibly, including developing policy lines for how state coordinators should approach their local substantive teams
- d. Sensitize UNDSS and other administrative sections such as MOVCON to the flexible nature of peacebuilding/CA work.

¹² See UNDP 2011. 'Community Security and Arms Control in Southern Sudan'. Available at http://www.sd.undp.org/projects/s_cp2.htm.

5. How can the UN strengthen the confidence of local populations in central authorities?

- a. Allocate all state coordinator positions to individuals with a CA background: that means persons with backgrounds from the country or at least the region, as well as experience in conflict management, analysis and local peacebuilding
- b. Promote greater information-sharing of CA conflict analyses and reports within and beyond the mission, including to the government and the UNDP, while acknowledging that some information may be too politically sensitive to share with the government.

About the project

The project of which this policy brief is a part examines how Civil Affairs in several missions operationalize and implement their mandates, through field research in Haiti, Liberia and South Sudan. It also studies how the UN peacekeeping more broadly has been organizing its work on the local level and working together with local authorities, other UN agencies and development actors. When initiating this study, the research team chose the Civil Affairs (CA) section of UN peacekeeping operations as an entry point, as this section is usually deployed wherever the peacekeeping mission has established presences, and is tasked with, inter alia, acting as the intermediary with local authorities and populations, as well as the rest of the UN peacekeeping mission and other UN actors. The present report is the result of one month of fieldwork in Juba, Eastern Equatoria State and Upper Nile State in October and November 2011. It forms part of the project *Contextualizing peacebuilding activities to local circumstances*, which is supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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