

Critical Reflection

Following the KOFF roundtable on

Reconciliation in South Sudan in the context of the current crisis

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Since mid-December 2013 South Sudan has been caught up in armed violence that has brought severe human rights violations, death, devastation and displacement. In March 2014 KOFF organised a roundtable to discuss ways in which Swiss actors could support ongoing reconciliation processes in conflict affected South Sudan. In the following pages Ferdinand von Habsburg-Lothringen, former Advisor to the Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation in South Sudan, first shares his view on reconciliation in South Sudan in relation to the current crisis. In the second part Briony Jones, Senior Researcher of Dealing with the Past Program, swisspeace, explores core aspects of the notion “reconciliation”.

[A broad overview of South Sudan post-December 15, 2013 – a crisis within a crisis?](#)

The current political and security crisis in South Sudan that saw fighting within the Presidential Guard spreading from Juba within the national army across the country as well as stoking serious social tensions between communities has had a massive negative impact on the trajectory of the world’s newest country and the region. Triggered by a political disagreement within the SPLM ruling party, this political and humanitarian crisis with well over 10,000 dead, over 1 million Internally-displaced persons (IDPs), approxi-

mately 250,000 refugees, as well as the wholesale destruction of 3 state capitals (Bentiu, Bor and Malakal) and numerous villages has indicated the magnitude of the problem.

Furthermore, political and socio-cultural polarisation is being deeply experienced leaving South Sudanese society more deeply divided than ever with signs of serious, unprecedented violence with the Nuer and Dinka communities drawn into the conflict. The inclusion of children in armed elements and the impact on young people at large will, in all likelihood, leave generational scars and a legacy that must be countered for many years to come.

The Government and the Opposition forces are engaging in political negotiations after a Cessation of Hostilities and Political Detainees agreement was signed earlier this year. A ‘Month of Tranquility’ saw relatively less violence but talks remain stalled as the parties seek to define the framework that will advance their positions. Consultations with civil society are being facilitated by IGAD, while the bodies responsible for working on national healing and reconciliation in South Sudan are consulting the parties and wider civil society. Currently, fighting continues with continued reports of serious human rights violations. The presence of Ugandan forces and reports of neighbouring countries supporting proxies further complicate the political situation.

The Committee for National Healing, Peace and Reconciliation (CNHPR) has linked up with the

South Sudan Peace and Reconciliation Commission (SSPRC) and the Specialised Committee on Peace and Reconciliation in the National Assembly (SCPR/NLA) to form a joint National Reconciliation Platform to engage South Sudanese and the IGAD-led political process.

With a vast, under-developed country suffering from poor or no infrastructure, dispersed communities, some of the lowest literacy rates in the world, huge communications' shortfalls and frequent outbreaks of insecurity, the challenges are evident when looking at the formulation of any solution.

South Sudan has undergone decades of violent conflicts, driven by deep-rooted socio-political imbalances, trauma and mistrust. The challenges have seemed insurmountable, both to South Sudanese and the international community

What solution is needed for South Sudan?

When the two chief parties to the Naivasha negotiations, the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M), signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, national reconciliation and healing was a clear but, in practice, peripheral part of a road map towards making unity attractive. Within the semi-autonomous Southern Sudan, active steps were taken to consolidate security through political/military accommodation of various former militia groups while a wider reconciliation was delayed.

With the dawn of independence, the Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan declared the people as 'dedicated to a genuine national healing process and the building of trust and confidence in our society through dialogue'. This reflected a fundamental recognition of the deep wounds and trauma of South Sudanese, both personal and collective, impacting on all levels of human relations, as well as of the need to hear victims' stories that have emerged from over half a century of civil wars and conflicts, thus the very human foundation of building a new nation through reconciliation.

But the iterations of nation and state-building that have been made through the frameworks of the

South Sudan Development Plan¹ and its vision for peace and prosperity, the commitment of Government and donors to the 'New Deal' with its recognition of the fragile nature of post-conflict South Sudan and the need for agreed priorities (through such approaches as the Peace Building Plan) and the articulation of state and county priorities have been out of step with actual events in the country.

Before and since the crisis, South Sudan has faced deep political, security, social and economic uncertainties. At this time, what do South Sudanese see around them which are symptomatic of the multiple challenges, past and present, in South Sudan? Violent conflicts, militias, hate speech, cattle raiding, small arms, land grabbing, fear, cyclical violence, anger, mistrust among others have undermined the potential for peace. Hence, some of the key priorities identified during the New Deal consultations in 2013² (national reconciliation, security sector reform and justice and accountability) appear to mirror the very issues that have come so violently to the surface.

SOME SOUTH SUDAN STATISTICS...

The 2008 census (though contested) indicated just over 8 million citizens in South Sudan, with a population density of 13 inhabitants per square kilometre. 83% of South Sudanese live in rural areas.

33.1% of the population is between the ages of 5 and 16, while there are twice as many 2 year olds as 21 year olds.

It has one of the lowest rates of adult literacy in the world at 27%, though this is slowly improving. 60% of teachers do not possess any professional training to be teachers; 46% have only primary school education only and 45% have secondary school education. There are approximately 1 million out-of-school children (in rural and urban areas).

53 languages including Juba Arabic are spoken. The largest 4 language groups: Bari, Dinka, Nuer and Zande form over 65% of the population.

Taken from various sources

¹ Government of the Republic of South Sudan 2011: The Development Plan of South Sudan. Juba: GoSS.

² Government of the Republic of South Sudan, Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, Aid Coordination Directorate 2012: Fragility Assessment. Republic of South Sudan 2012. Draft Summary Results. Juba: GoSS. http://www.newdeal4peace.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/South-Sudan_FA-Summary_Draft_121212.pdf. (Accessed on April 12 2014).

Ultimately, drawing up agreed priorities to help resolve over half a century of conflicts will not be a task dictated through IGAD or the international community solely, being that what solution is advocated for stands for the ruling party elites rather than South Sudanese. Citizens are seeking to hear the truth, to find justice and prosperity after decades of war, conflict and poverty.

Parallel solutions are currently being discussed through various frameworks including IGAD, the New Deal, World Bank and IMF. This risks externally-driven solutions contradicting each other.

[Cutting quick deals versus building foundations for a nation – some lessons learnt](#)

Domestic and international concerns over the ongoing violence and the stalemate at the IGAD talks indicate a slow and potentially turbulent next phase. While diplomats are hoping for a quick resolution, both belligerents and citizens alike believe a more drawn-out process is likely. Cutting deals for elites on either side of the divide will only serve to bury the real issues until the next crisis emerges and many therefore urge for a full process of healing and reconciliation, one looking honestly and deeply into the past and recent times. Equally hazardous is the hard-edged pressure being exerted by various countries on South Sudan in the hope of pressuring concessions and a softer stance in the negotiations – an approach that, at similar delicate stages of other post-conflict states' developments, has led to hardening and more resistance rather than any lessening.

Traditional reconciliation, outside of political processes, has been tried and tested, though with contrasting results, including during the Wunlit people-to-people process (1999) and Jonglei Conference (2012). These processes have been undermined by both politicians and the military, while the designs and frameworks have often explicitly avoided looking at political and social issues together, thus preventing the possibility of sustainable peace building. Additionally, building on dialogue through conflict-sensitive development has been a feature only of a few international NGOs in partnership with

small local organisations rather than a wider policy of government in a post-conflict setting.

Building the foundations of the nation of South Sudan would need: spaces for truth-telling to help all reflect on the past and present where citizens and their leaders (political, military and social) confront grievances; a discussion and recognition of the many histories of the country; a consensus among South Sudanese of how to address the grievances (including mechanisms, time frames, legal framework); thereafter building a common vision for the nation out of the many that exist across the counties;

[Critical Reflections on the notion of reconciliation](#)

When responding to the key issues raised by Ferdinand von Habsburg-Lothringen, it is important to not only think about the specifics of the context of South Sudan but also to reflect more broadly on 'reconciliation', which is a notoriously ill-defined and slippery concept. When seeking to support a reconciliation process each actor is faced with a set of choices, the response to which will depend not only on the empirical situation at hand but also the positionality of the actor vis-à-vis the affected community. When making decisions on how best to support a reconciliation process, as a non-local actor, it is important to address the following five key questions:

[What is Reconciliation?](#)

In the presentation on South Sudan, as with many other cases, reconciliation seems to be conceived of as an 'end point', for example in the idea of 'the roadmap to reconciliation'. This is a teleological approach which raises in turn a series of issues. If we seek reconciliation as an end point then we need to be conceptually and methodologically clear on how we know when we have arrived. This is particularly important if we consider that funding from donors may be contingent on whether (a) work is still needed to be done or (b) positive impacts on reconciliation can be seen as a result of the funding support. An *a priori* definition of reconciliation (as an end point) has the danger of constraining and determining external support before the process

has even started, and of providing a 'get out clause' for donors to cease their support once reconciliation has been achieved. In addition, it is highly likely that many different definitions of reconciliation are present in any given context, meaning that even if we seek reconciliation as an end point it will be impossible for the South Sudanese to arrive there at the same time. As the roundtable presentation highlighted there have been a series of overlapping crises in South Sudan, and thus it follows that there would not be just one reconciliation but in fact many different reconciliations. It is important that these different perspectives on what reconciliation looks like are afforded legitimate public space, but as a non-local actor one may be forced to make a decision about which particular vision of reconciliation to support and which are consequently marginalised.

[How do we do Reconciliation?](#)

In the South Sudan case, again as with many others, the conflict and thus the reconciliation landscape are very complex. There are cleavages between regions, ethnic groups, political interests, social groups, etc. When designing reconciliation support interventions we need to be clear what or who we are reconciling with what or whom. We might think here of two main options: Either a focus on specific reconciliation programmes or a focus on supporting other activities which are believed to be conducive to creating an environment in which reconciliation may be able to take place.

This means being careful about assuming that some divisions (and the identities attached to them) are more important than others. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, reconciliation programmes which have focused solely on ethno-national identity have taken money away from other excellent programmes which did not have the 'right' ethnic mix, have failed to see how other social and political divisions intersect with ethno-national identity and influence reconciliation processes, and have ended up reinforcing the ethno-national narrative which fuelled the violence in the first place.

[Who Owns Reconciliation?](#)

There is an increasing acknowledgement that local ownership of reconciliation processes is important, and indeed that reconciliation can only take place if it is framed in a way that is meaningful for those that are supposed to reconcile. There is a danger though, that consultation processes end up putting a rubber stamp of legitimacy on processes which are surprisingly similar across many different contexts. In the roundtable presentation some options are mentioned (prosecution for gross human rights violations, memorials, truth-seeking initiatives, traditional), all of which are the 'usual suspects' in the current consensus around how to 'deal with the past'. The key challenge for South Sudan will be carving out a genuinely meaningful and relevant reconciliation process from the noise of international norms, models such as South Africa, and pressure to make 'legitimate' choices as a state. Furthermore, what prosecutions, truth-telling, memorials will look like and the specific form and content of them will require a series of choices and negotiations as part of an inclusive process between South Sudanese actors.

[How are Reconciliation and Nation-Building Connected?](#)

There seems to be an emphasis in the South Sudanese case on directly linking reconciliation with nation-building. This has been done also in Rwanda 'we are all Rwandans' and South Africa 'the Rainbow Nation'. However, there is a word of caution here. Reconciliation relies not only on consensus (i.e. one nation) but on the expression of difference (the differences which are being reconciled). Making reconciliation reliant on nation-building may end up putting too much pressure on the process and may lead to longer-term problems as different individuals and groups strive to find a place in a broader and dominant discourse of consensus. The other cases where reconciliation and nation-building have been directly and strongly connected are not simple success stories. In Rwanda there are increasing concerns expressed by some observers that authoritarianism is required to hold together the unity narrative, and in South Africa the rainbow nation is under strain as the realities of economic inequalities belie its unifying discourse.

Reconciliation and Politics

We have heard in the roundtable presentation that it is important for the reconciliation process to be 'apolitical'. This raises a dilemma for non-local actors hoping to support such processes: do they try to be apolitical and only support processes which are perceived to be so; or do they work directly with the politics of the situation and the inevitably political context in which reconciliation occurs. As cautioned by Christodoulidis and Veitch a reference to a politics of reconciliation is "to put to question what increasingly – more and more alarmingly too – is taken for granted in uncritical calls for reconciliation... [which] too often come to signify in the political discourse of our time the call not just to put the traumas of the past behind us but also, in a sense, to put behind us the very politics of the past"³.

³ Christodoulidis, E. & Veitch, S. 2007: Introduction. In Veitch, S. (Ed.) Law and the Politics of Reconciliation. Aldershot and Burlington, Ashgate. p.1

swisspeace

swisspeace is a practice-oriented peace research institute. It carries out research on violent conflicts and their peaceful transformation. The Foundation aims to build up Swiss and international organizations' civilian peacebuilding capacities by providing trainings, space for networking and exchange of experiences. It also shapes political and academic discourses on peace policy issues at the national and international level through publications, workshops and conferences. swisspeace therefore promotes knowledge transfer between researchers and practitioners. swisspeace was founded in 1988 as the Swiss Peace Foundation in order to promote independent peace research in Switzerland. Today the Foundation employs more than 40 staff members. Its most important donors are the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss National Science Foundation and the United Nations.

Center for Peacebuilding (KOFF)

The Center of Peacebuilding (KOFF) of the Swiss Peace Foundation swisspeace was founded in 2001 and is funded by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and 45 Swiss non-governmental organizations. The center's objective is to strengthen Swiss actors' capacities in civilian peacebuilding by providing information, training and consultancy services. KOFF acts as a networking platform fostering policy dialogue and processes of common learning through roundtables and workshops.

Critical reflections

In its *critical reflection* publications, swisspeace and its guest speakers critically reflect on topics addressed at roundtables. They both make a note of the arguments put forward during the roundtables and carry on the discussion in order to encourage further debates.