

CSRF Meta-Analysis: International Engagement in South Sudan

This Research Repository has been compiled by the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) to assist donors and aid workers in South Sudan to better understand the context in which they work. The repository is searchable by key words, and it is categorized by “theory focus” and “practice focus” to enable easier exploration of specific topics. The CSRF has conducted a meta-analysis for eight theoretical categories, analysing a selection of relevant, key literature and extracting some of the most salient questions for donor-funded programming. This meta-analysis provides an overview of literature available on the role of international engagement in South Sudan.

The CSRF is implemented by a consortium of Saferworld and swisspeace and supports conflict-sensitive aid programming in South Sudan. The United Kingdom, Switzerland, Canada, the Netherlands and the European Union have joined forces to develop shared resources through the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility in South Sudan.

Introduction

The literature on international engagement in South Sudan tends to focus on the role of Western actors and only to a limited extent explores the multi-layered role of other countries including China, Russia, India, Malaysia or Turkey. Publications focusing on the pre-2005 context mostly explore international engagement in terms of humanitarian aid and the peace process leading to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and to a lesser extent on oil exploration and related human rights violations. After 2005, researchers have explored international engagement in relation to recovery, peace building and state building endeavours. Literature after the 2013 crisis attempts to understand the failures of the pre-2013 engagement and is mostly written with an eye to policy recommendations for international actors engaging in the ongoing humanitarian response, civilian protection, and supporting the implementation of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS).

The following questions were developed with the aim of providing insights into the trajectories of international engagement in South Sudan and how those interrelate with the dynamics of conflict and humanitarian crisis.

1. **How has the relation between South Sudan and the international community evolved over time?**
2. **Why have the billions of dollars spent on South Sudan from 2005 onwards produced so few lasting results?**
3. **What can we learn from Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) (late 1980s to 2005)?**
4. **What is the role of the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS)?**
5. **What is the role of non-Western countries in South Sudan?**

1. How has the relation between South Sudan and the international community evolved over time?

While many countries voiced support for the newly independent South Sudan in 2011, relations quickly deteriorated. In a dispute with Sudan, South Sudan halted oil production in January 2012, surprising international partners. Armed clashes at the border with Sudan a few months later demonstrated the international community's limited leverage over Juba.

Both issues were only resolved by extensive international mediation. The interruption to oil production lasted 15 months and deprived the South Sudanese state of most of its revenue. The spread between the official and parallel exchange rates increased as a result, devaluing foreign development assistance and creating greater incentives for corruption by the leakage of foreign exchange from government reserves, in what was a time of austerity and lesser tolerance for mass corruption. Critical voices complaining of authoritarian tendencies became more prevalent after 2011, pointing, for instance, at the transitional constitution that provided the executive with additional powers.

The outbreak of civil war in 2013 further damaged the relationship of trust between the international community and the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS). International actors criticised the GRSS for resisting the peace process and spending oil revenues on warfare rather than development or service delivery.

The process leading to the signing and the implementation of both the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS) in 2015 and the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018 has been supported by several donors, albeit not with the same confidence that was felt during the CPA times. In support of the ongoing transition period, several donors are today funding the monitoring mechanisms Ceasefire & Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring & Verification Mechanism (CTSAMVM) and Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC), which are administered by IGAD. Due to donors' distrust of the government, however, they are hesitant to channel funds directly through the state, in the form of budget support. This creates a dilemma: While donors will not fund the government to implement the peace process as long as they suspect corruption and do not see any meaningful government commitment to the implementation of the peace agreement, the government justifies the slow implementation progress with the lack of donor funding. To express their frustration with the situation, the

United States, which is and continues to be the largest donor to South Sudan, has suspended its support of the two monitoring bodies in July 2022.

The focus on humanitarian aid, in the case of South Sudan, implemented through the UN system and international aid agencies and the donor's reluctance to channel funds through the government led to criticism from government representatives. South Sudanese officials have complained that international actors' actions bypass the government and thereby undermine sovereignty.

Aid organisations have been facing challenges accessing beneficiaries in areas controlled by the

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government and armed groups, due to administrative obstacles, attacks on aid infrastructure, harassment, and the arrest and in some cases killing of staff. Aid continues to be manipulated, diverted and looted.

2. Why have the billions of dollars spent on South Sudan from 2005 onwards produced so few lasting results?

After the signing of the CPA in 2005, the international donor community provided large sums of aid to South Sudan. It was anticipated that support to peacebuilding, recovery, development, state building, and service and

infrastructure provision would foster peace, stability and state legitimacy. The official logic of the CPA was to work for a united Sudan, rather than two independent states. Therefore, some activities related to governance and statebuilding that might have better prepared South Sudan for independence were avoided in the early years of the CPA implementation period.

The impact of international support was limited by severe logistical constraints and the absence of almost any services and infrastructure in 2005. This made it difficult to meaningfully improve state capacity and access to services. International engagement has been criticised for a number of shortcomings including following a top down, technical, apolitical, state-centric approach rather than one more grounded in the specific context. Criticism has also been levelled at the piecemeal nature of support with short-term projects being implemented across different sectors without sufficient durability or sustainability. International funds were disproportionately funnelled into capacity building training of government staff in Juba, at the expense of support to more peripheral areas, in a more dynamic range of capacity building exercises. The nature of support for livelihoods often did not adequately consider and incorporate local realities, practices and norms. For example, international support was often designed for sedentary populations rather than for pastoralists; livestock support in some areas diminished after 2005. Land tenure reform policies pursued with the support of international actors were rife with potential for sowing further conflict and discord. Nor did state building endeavours sufficiently consider the politics of development and state-building, or take into account informal authorities playing pivotal roles in politics and governance. Nation building and reconciliation were neglected by the international community.

With the renewed outbreak of a civil war in 2013, there has been a shift back to humanitarian assistance and away from development and statebuilding objectives. Until today and in spite of the (Revitalised) Peace Agreement, conflict and violence are persisting. Juba-level political and military tensions often

reach to and escalate at the sub-national level, causing death, displacement and food insecurity in many areas of the country. Above-average cycles of floods and droughts also contribute to a persisting humanitarian emergency, and a substantial part of the population depends on humanitarian assistance, particularly food aid. These circumstances, coupled with the distrust in government authorities, make it difficult for donor agencies to have an impact beyond emergency response and to move from treating symptoms to addressing root causes of crisis. Moreover, much of the above-mentioned criticism persists. Much of the literature thus addresses questions of how international engagement could become more effective, emphasizing the need of conflict sensitivity and propagating different approaches hoping for better results, such as the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus, the localization

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agenda or a stronger focus on resilience. For example, in line with the Renewed National Development Strategy (R-NDS), the UN Country Team has made the HDP nexus a central

principle for the development of the 2023–2025 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) and is currently further developing strategies to strengthen nexus-type programming, including via the **Partnership for Peace, Recovery and Resilience (PfPRR)**.¹

Overall, over the last year funds for international aid decreased, compared to increasing humanitarian needs. Several donors have undergone budget cuts and other international crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and conflicts in Afghanistan, Ethiopia or the Ukraine, have drawn the international attention away from South Sudan. The U.S. is still the largest donor.

3. What can we learn from Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) (late 1980s to 2005)?

Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) began as a large-scale humanitarian response to the Bahr el-Ghazal famine of 1989. Based on a tripartite arrangement between the UN, the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), OLS provided a system of humanitarian access that varied depending on whether areas were under GoS or SPLM/A control. One lesson from OLS is that negotiated access to beneficiaries requires creative modalities and ongoing coordination. Another lesson is to take criticism and adapt interventions accordingly: OLS recognised a need for more sustainable support to livelihoods and progressed from providing emergency food aid to veterinary services and to agricultural support, with the goal of increasing resilience.

Access to humanitarian aid became part of the strategy of conflict parties and arguably even served to prolong the war. The substantial aid OLS offered altered local political economies and proved not to be as neutral or impartial as intended. Aid operations became partially motivated by political considerations and were

forced to sometimes compromise the aim of serving those most in need.

Much research was conducted to better understand the context, the unintended consequences of aid and local norms and mechanisms, such as local support mechanisms. However, despite this knowledge, transferring findings from research to policy and practice was a challenge in those years, as it is now. In the ongoing humanitarian response, political economy dimensions of the impact of aid on current conflict dynamics should be better understood and considered, including the question of whether humanitarian aid is prolonging and fostering the armed conflict today.

Go to the source

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4. What is the role of UNMISS?

The mandate of UNMISS was established in 2011 and has been renewed annually since then. While its initial focus was mainly on statebuilding, the mandate of UNMISS today includes 1) the protection of civilians, 2) creating conditions conducive to the delivery of humanitarian assistance, 3) supporting the implementation of R-ARCSS and 4) monitoring, investigating and reporting on violations of humanitarian and human rights law.² The size of the UNMISS force has been increased twice since December 2013. Furthermore, as a response to the July 2016 clashes in Juba, the UN Security Council mandated a Regional Protection Force (RPF) of 4,000 soldiers, to provide security in Juba, which started arriving in mid-2017. While the RPF’s deployment freed up other troops to

¹ <https://www.southsudanpfr.org/>

² <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/background>

be redeployed elsewhere in the country, the basic limitations of UNMISS have persisted. Today, UNMISS has a mandated strength of 17,954 deployed personnel.³

Most discussions on the effectiveness of UNMISS revolve around its mandate to protect civilians. In 2013, hundreds of thousands of civilians fled fighting and sought refuge at United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) bases, leading to the establishment of the so-called Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites. The fact that less than 10 percent of the 2 million people displaced within South Sudan were housed in PoCs raised the question of whether UNMISS's focus on PoCs was disproportionate, and whether the stark disparity of the provision of protection was itself a pull factor leading to an increase in civilians seeking refuge at such sites. Furthermore, according to UNMISS, a considerable number of their peacekeeping troops were needed to protect the PoCs, which limited the ability of UNMISS to project force beyond its bases. For these reasons and arguing that the security situation had improved considerably since 2016, UNMISS decided in 2020 to hand over all but one of the PoC sites to government authorities and transform them into regular IDP camps. According to UNMISS, this indeed helped them to increase their mobility and ability to address issues across the country at sub-national levels. At the same time, the decision was strongly criticized by aid actors and researchers. A 2021 CSRF analysis found that in 2019 and 2020, while 90% of the UNMISS police personnel were deployed to the PoC sites, only 14% of UNMISS peacekeeping troops were stationed there. This challenges UNMISS' official reasoning of handing over the PoC sites to free up peacekeeping personnel for other purposes. Furthermore, aid actors and researchers are criticising UNMISS for ignoring that national-level peace has not led to the absence of violence at the sub-national level, which means that the risk of violence within the camps is still high. Finally, the fact that those who live in the PoC sites are now administered and controlled by the very same actors whom

they had fled from in the first place is considered a high risk for the affected populations.

Go to the source

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5. What is the role of non-Western countries in South Sudan?

Literature on international engagement in South Sudan is still very much shaped by Western perspectives and focuses on the engagement of Western donors, including EU member states and the U.S. Among non-Western countries, the role of China and Russia is better analysed than others.

The rapprochement between South Sudan and China, which had historically aided Sudan, started with the signing of the CPA, when China was instrumental in persuading Khartoum to

³ <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/facts-and-figures>

abide by the agreement in turn for gaining access to South Sudan's oil. As elsewhere in Africa, China has played an important role in the (re)construction and development of infrastructure, although the scale of its projects outside of the oil sector remains relatively modest. The recurring civil war has affected plans to expand investments in South Sudan. From China's perspective, stability is a precondition for development in South Sudan. This is also shown by the Chinese troops that are part of UNMISS. With 1055 troops, this deployment is China's largest international peacekeeping commitment. At the same time, China has also provided humanitarian assistance, including food aid.

Russia's diplomatic relations with South Sudan started with South Sudan's independence, after which Russia formally recognized the latter and declared its interest to develop economic ties with South Sudan. Given the continued instability, investments have remained low, apart from some cooperation in the oil sector. Diplomatic relations are, however, intact, which is shown by a visit of then foreign minister of South Sudan Awut Deng Acuil to her counterpart in Russia in 2020, and Kiir's recent announcement to join the Russia-Africa summit in 2023. The ties between Russia and South Sudan can be interpreted as part of Russia's intention to strengthen its influence throughout the African continent, currently being the biggest arms supplier across Africa.

Apart from China and Russia, other non-Western countries have had an important role in South Sudan as well, both as donors or as investors

through their involvement in the oil industry. These include, among others, Turkey, Malaysia, or also the United Arab Emirates. Literature on their role remains, apart from a few news articles.

[Further publications on international engagement in South Sudan are available in the CSRF Research Repository.](#)

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