

# CSRF Case Study # 4 – Understanding the Nature of Conflict

## *Conflict Sensitivity at the System Level*

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*This is the highest level of interaction for the CSRF, where it engages with the basic theories and understandings that drive how the aid system frames its engagement in South Sudan. It is therefore the most difficult to tie to discrete actions that have prevented or reduced conflict, but potentially the most important as well, as it interacts with the highest-level objectives and assumptions of the aid system. The CSRF seeks to contribute to paradigm shifts within the aid sector at this level through its convening, analysis, and capacity-strengthening.*

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### Background

The nature of conflict in South Sudan is often oversimplified by aid actors who are not given the tools or motivation to understand the context well. Local violent conflicts are often misrepresented as inevitable and culturally driven and there is insufficient awareness of the modern political components that drive them. This poor understanding of the nature of conflict in South Sudan is problematic for several important reasons:

It causes the aid sector to plan poorly: A misunderstanding of the nature of conflict undermines the aid community's understanding of the security, development, and humanitarian implications of changes in the context. For example, the humanitarian community's measures that are used to predict food security have tended to treat 'intercommunal violence' as qualitatively different than 'armed conflict,' and less likely to cause severe food insecurity. Thus, key segments within the international community were largely caught off-guard by famine conditions in Jonglei State in 2020, having not understood the implications of the widespread violence there.

It undermines appropriate localisation: A belief that violent conflict is endemic and natural to South Sudan's communities feeds into stereotypes that can discourage needed investments in localised aid. It also shifts attention away from, and potentially shifts resources into, the political and social structures that are in fact perpetuating sub-national violence.

It prevents the aid sector from responding to the actual challenges South Sudan is facing: A narrative that local violence is inevitable and culturally determined stops the aid community from understanding and responding to the actual (often politically related) drivers of structural conflict and humanitarian need. It keeps the aid sector focused only on addressing the short-term impacts of conflict in ways that will not help the country in the long run.

### CSRF Engagement

The aid community's miscalculation over the impacts of the conflict in Jonglei in 2020 opened the door for the CSRF and others to engage on this discussion, facilitating greater consensus around the nature of conflict in South Sudan and co-producing with WFP a guidance note<sup>1</sup> that was adopted and endorsed by

*This paper is one of four case studies commissioned by the CSRF in February 2022 to better understand where and how contributions to conflict sensitivity have been made, and to draw out lessons for future engagement by the CSRF or other similar facilities. The case studies examine and compare outcomes at the activity, programme, sector, and paradigm level.*

*For more information about the CSRF, visit [www.csrf-southsudan.org](http://www.csrf-southsudan.org)*

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<sup>1</sup> WFP and CSRF (2020), 'Adjusting Terminology for Organised Violence in South Sudan.' September.

the wider humanitarian community under the Humanitarian Country Team. The CSRF is credited by the other key actors involved as having played the following important roles in the process.

Technical inputs: The CSRF co-wrote the Guidance Note on conflict terminology with WFP, providing analysis and technical inputs. However, the impact of the CSRF goes back further – the conflict analyst leading the initial engagement from WFP’s side credits the CSRF for providing the initial space and conceptual building blocks for the exercise and building the necessary culture of inquiry and analysis; “Over the years, CSRF helped me to put my ideas together. They accumulated over time because the CSRF is always there, bringing people together and pushing the agenda.”<sup>2</sup>

Process-oriented leadership: The CSRF is perceived as having been the ‘shepherd’ of the process, playing a leadership role within the subgroup tasked with the work, keeping it on track, involving the right people at the right time. Because of its wide network and ability to facilitate conversations, it has strong competencies for constructing and leading open-ended processes, with “an ability to bring together stakeholders and generate buy-in.”<sup>3</sup> The facility also has the mandate of holding space for reflection, which keeps it insulated from the daily emergency-related demands on most humanitarians.

Neutral, credible convening: Other actors in this conversation repeatedly emphasised the importance of the CSRF’s neutrality and independence within the aid sector. Because of inter-agency competition for funding and space, the space for leadership and inquiry is also contested. Because the CSRF does not receive funding from any of the competing agencies, and because it has a mandate specifically for conflict sensitivity, it is uniquely able to bring together a range of actors to build consensus. In addition to partnering with WFP on the guidance note, the CSRF was also asked by OCHA to act as the ‘Secretariat’ and convenor for the discussion around terminology, and was invited by the Humanitarian Donor Group to host a roundtable to discuss the new terminology and its implications for understanding the 2020 violence in Jonglei and elsewhere.

## Outcomes

The collective analysis around the nature of conflict in South Sudan has impacted aid programming in some distinct, and some less tangible ways.

- **Improved analysis:** Donors, UN, and NGO staff interviewed for this case study agreed that the level and quality of analysis within the aid sector improved because of this multi-actor initiative. Donors are better equipped to ask probing and critical questions from their partners, and NGOs and agencies are better able to understand the dynamics where they work.<sup>4</sup>
- **Improved planning:** The shifts in language and analysis around conflict directly impacted the OCHA-led Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP). “We now have a small chapter on conflict sensitivity in the HRP.”<sup>5</sup> This affects how the humanitarian sector understands the relationship between conflict and need, enabling more contextualised aid responses.
- **Senior level endorsement:** Leaders within the aid sector adopted and endorsed the analysis. “The analysis has been taken up by the [British] Embassy and in our communications with others, like our partner.”<sup>6</sup> The UNMISS SRSG also publicly endorsed and encouraged the use of more nuanced understanding of intercommunal violence.

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with former WFP conflict analyst. January 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with IOM conflict analyst. February 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with former FCDO Senior Conflict Advisor. January 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with OCHA Humanitarian Affairs Officer. January 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with FCDO Conflict Advisor. January 2022.

- **Direct influence on programme design:** The analysis that emerged directly influenced the design and strategy of a large WFP-led consortium approach to Community Violence Reduction programme in Jonglei, which started in January 2021. This activity uses the analysis of the nature of violence and conflict as a starting point for its engagement and is intended to actively build peace whilst delivering humanitarian and resilience programming.

Because this was an initiative of multiple actors, it is not possible to disaggregate or isolate the CSRF's contribution to any of the outcomes above. It was truly a collaborative approach, and as such, was more effective than would be the efforts of any individual actor.

An ongoing challenge for the CSRF and its partners will be to ensure that the energy and critical analysis motivated through this process is sustained with integrity. There will always be a risk that important initiatives are reduced to bureaucratic, tick-box exercises, especially as those who were most deeply involved and invested leave post, and others arrive. Greater recognition and integration of South Sudanese perspectives and skills into the aid sector's analysis and approach would make a substantial contribution, but without deeper changes to the aid system's approach to staffing, turnover, and institutional memory, this will always be a challenge.

### Key Findings and Lessons

- The CSRF is uniquely able to convene joint analysis and action from agencies that are otherwise in competition. This is because of their **perceived independence, integrity, and ability to provide a neutral space for problem-solving and collective approaches**. This is enabled by their operational and financial independence from UN agencies and NGOs.
- The CSRF's long-term horizon and approach has enabled it to build trust and credibility and contribute to a culture of analysis, inquiry, and action. **The seeds for the conversation on the nature of conflict and violence were planted and nurtured over years of engagement, both in formal and informal spaces.**
- Part of CSRF's impact is its ability to identify and build conflict sensitivity champions. **"What made CSRF so effective is the coalition of the willing.** They identified and empowered champions and built their capacity. Donors were equipped to ask smarter questions. This built energy and momentum." - *Former FCDO Senior Conflict Advisor in South Sudan*
- The CSRF's contributions to changes in the aid paradigm can be hugely impactful in terms of building a culture of inquiry, analysis, and action. Yet, in the absence of larger reforms to the aid sector, they can only go so far. **The CSRF and its donors have the potential to contribute to global learning that can motivate much-needed reforms** to some of the structural aspects of the aid system's role, its implicit and explicit objectives, and its conflict sensitivity.