Channels of Change in South Sudan: Youth Civil Society Organizations & Critical Empathy in Nation-Building

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Through a case study of the South Sudanese Upper Nile Youth Development Association (UNYDA), the author illustrates how youth have the potential to assist communities in dealing with past and current violence, restoring trust, and rebuilding social fabric. These are key factors for service delivery, social construction, and social and economic development in the journey towards nation-building. I propose an adoption of youth-centered programs by both state and international actors in order to empower youth organizations to take a primary role in efforts to end the violence in South Sudan, restore trust, and rebuild the country’s social fabric.

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Prior to July 2011, Sudan, Africa's largest country, possessed extraordinary ethnic and cultural diversity (Akolawin 1973). However, one of the major challenges for Sudan since gaining independence in 1956 from Anglo-Egyptian colonial rule has been building a coherent nation-state out of such diversity society. Unfortunately, Sudan's leaders have not risen to this challenge — indeed, the last six decades have seen brutal civil wars, and a succession of parliamentary and military governments that have ignored or exploited Sudan's ethnic and cultural diversity in pursuit of their own factional political and economic agendas. The cause of Sudan's civil war is complex: "religion, local perceptions of race, social status, economic exploitation, and colonial and post-colonial interventions are all elements in Sudan's civil war, but none, by itself, fully explain it" (Johnson 2003, 1-2), with the Sudanese state playing a critical and central role in hindering regional development, while producing racial and cultural antagonisms (Ibid). As a result, tension amongst different ethnicities and cultures has repeatedly escalated in different parts of the country, especially between Northern and Southern Sudan (1955-1972) and (1983-2005) and in other regions like the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile (more recently Darfur). Francis Deng describes the conflict between North and South Sudan as a "conflict of identities." Southerners claim that they were being oppressed by the northerners, whom they view as having imposed their culture (Islamic/Arabic) as "the national identity [and the determinant of] the distribution of power, wealth, services and development opportunities" (Deng 2009, 10).

As a result, Sudanese society became polarized and divided along two lines. Even though the war was between North and South Sudan, there were considerable fractions among the tribes of each region. Both parties (SPLA/M and the government of Sudan) mobilized different tribes as their proxy, creating tensions and divisions among these groups. In South Sudan, this situation created tensions between and among some southern tribes, which led to continuous fighting, mistrust, and the destruction of the social fabric that had once held these groups together. As explained by Jok Madut Jok (2013):

In the war between North and South Sudan, before independence, tribal militias were formed and had been involved in Khartoum's attempts to fight the South by proxy, and these militias have left behind strained tribal relations, some of which continue to present the new country with serious disarmament challenges. The same was true for the attempts by the southern opposition to create its own militias to defend their communities or the occasional deployment of some units of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) to respond to pockets of resistance by some ethnic groups to the SPLA's agenda, where many excesses took place in what escalated at times into a South-South confrontation (2).

Even though tribes in South Sudan, like many other tribes in Africa, have historically competed over grazing pasture and engaged in cattle rustling practices that often triggered cycles of inter-tribal violence, conflicts have always been mitigated by the customary law system. However, political mobilization deepened the divisions between tribes and caused more harm and violence. In their analysis of the conflict between the Nuer and Dinka peoples, Aleu Akechak Jok et al. cites a Nuer chief who notes that:
They used to tell us that the reason why Nuer and Dinka fight each other was because we are ignorant. We don’t know anything because we are not educated. But now look at all this killing! This war between the Nuer and Dinka is much worse than anything we experienced in the past. And it is the war of [the] educated [elite]- It is not our war at all! (1999, 131).

These tensions\(^1\) generate fear within communities, causing tribes to become afraid of each other and draw physical boundaries to protect themselves against further bloodshed. These ethnic borders can only be crossed at the risk of one’s life. Jok defines ethnic division as a threat to political unity and the nation building project, and by extension, the nation’s very existence:

Current relations between ethnic groups are often influenced by stereotypes that write off entire ethnic groups as ‘enemies of state’ and that tie entire ethnic groups to certain political or military figures with checkered war-time histories (2013, 4).

The Sudan Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), was signed in 2005, granting South Sudan the right to decide its future through an internationally monitored referendum. However, it is worth noting that this agreement was largely political in regard to the sharing of wealth and power. No transitional justice mechanisms, such as criminal persecution, truth commission or reparations, were in place to address past issues. As such, wartime violence and trauma inflicted and experienced by communities in South Sudan remained unaddressed. In January 2011, Southern Sudan overwhelmingly voted for separation, and the Republic of South Sudan was born as an independent state in July of the same year.

Preface

This paper was completed in October 2012. Since that time, there have been major political changes in the newly declared state of South Sudan. In December of 2013, intrastate conflict erupted within the newly emerged state, resulting in a devastating impact on the Sudanese people. Civilians represent the main target of the current ongoing conflict between the warring parties. The fighting is mostly along ethnic lines, resulting in a humanitarian crisis that displaced 2.7 million people, with over 1 million fleeing Sudan to seek refuge in neighboring countries (Blanchard 2016). The causes of this conflict have been explained by political commentator Mahmood Mamdani:

How does one understand the current conflict in South Sudan? Two major explanations are on offer: The first claims it as an ethnic struggle between the two largest groups in the country, the Dinka and the Nuer, the first led by President Salva Kiir, and the second by his deputy, Riek Machar. The second explanation sees it as a power struggle between individuals in the SPLM/A Leadership. Neither explanation can be ignored; however, they aren’t sufficient to explain the conflict. This is because both ignore key ingredients in the conflict: the process of state

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\(^1\) Three main ethnic groups in Bahr El Ghazal (Dinka, Fertit, and Jur) and three main tribes in Upper Nile (Dinka, Shluk, and Nuer)
formation that has further politicized ethnic allegiances, and the ideological preferences that both intersect with, and soften, ethnic conflict (Aljazeera 2014).

John Young (2012), on the other hand, criticizes the international US-Led Sudan (CPA), for its failure to promote democratic transitions and peace in the two Sudans. Young attributes the failure of the CPA to the fact that it was exclusively negotiated between the two major parties to the conflict and excluded civil society and rebel groups. The current situation in South Sudan confirm what this paper attempts to reflect: the fragile peace in South Sudan and the unresolved status of past ethnic tensions and grievances between ethnic groups that have contributed to the weakening of its social fabric and nation-building processes. The paper’s key message is that youth and youth organizations are agents that could play a critical role in conflict transformation, social construction, and social fabric repair within the divided nation of Sudan in order to nation-building that embraces diversity.

Macro-mechanism approaches to peace, like peace agreements, which contribute to ending conflict and maintaining certain economic aspects of civilian life, address only a narrow part of peace and recovery. In this paper, I argue that this framework alone does not guarantee political, social, and economic recovery at a community level; moreover, I argue that this framework cannot guarantee lasting peace unless it includes efforts by civilians—and youth (civil society organizations) in particular—who have the potential to address political, social, and economic challenges in a way that is meaningful to ordinary people at the local level.

The below is a dialogue below between two Somali cousins - one of whom is a representative for a Somali civilian organization, while the other is a representative of a key political party in Somalia - at an UN-sponsored Somali national reconciliation conference. Their interaction accurately captures the dilemma of pursuing peace in the African context. The representative for the Somali civilian organization asks:

“How is it that you warlords think that one of you has the right to be president?” He was referring to the political haggling and resulting impasse that seemed to occur at every Somali peace conference as a result of contending claims over what clan, and ultimately what person, would rise to presidency. “Don’t you know… that without a frame the roof of a house collapses?”

“You know as well as I,” replied the chairman [the key political leader], deftly shifting metaphors… “the key to a healthy body is a good head. I have never seen legs walk or arms move without a head.”

“Dear cousin,” …[he] replied with a deep note of sadness, “the house has collapsed. The legs have been crushed, the arms are bled clean. There is no body to be head of” (Lederach 1997).

Violent conflict divides communities and damages the social fabric that represents the body of the nation. How to repair the body of the nation remains a major challenge facing many African countries whose wars have been characterized by multilayered conflict, with ethnic/tribal conflict feeding the macro–level conflict. It is surprising how “it has become commonplace to contrast how today it is civilians who are the targets...
whereas ‘before’, especially in the First World War, it was the military” (Last 2000, 370). There are many reasons for targeting civilians, but polarizing and dividing society by creating an us/them mentality based on ethnicity, race, culture, and language is a central tactic, as it makes it easier for politicians to exploit identity differences as part of a “divide and rule” strategy that provides them access to power and resources. The challenge that remains is rebuilding the social fabric—which constitutes the body, and which Lederach refers to as the “peace house” that was destroyed by the civil war—necessary to create an enabling environment for political, social, and economic repair. Though rarely acknowledged, polarized and divided societies still hold enormous social capital that allows them to overcome harsh circumstances, such as even war.

This paper addressed the following questions:

How should we understand peace, social repair, and civil society organizations, in particular within an African society?

What organizational strategies does UNYDA use to address the ethnic divisions among Sudanese youth?

How does UNYDA define peace and social repair? How do they define “polarization” and “breach of trust?”

Why This Topic?

The war between North and South Sudan did more than trigger violence at the state level between the armies of these states, it also triggered violence among different ethnicities within South Sudan and deepened divisions among different ethnicities. In order to resolve the conflict, the CPA, signed by Sudan People’s Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) and the Government of Sudan were introduced as part of a diplomatic strategy for sharing wealth and power between the two main warring parties. The CPA addressed the conflict and tension between SPLA/M (who claimed to represent South Sudan) and the National Congress Party (NCP) (who claimed to represent the government of North Sudan). Unfortunately, grassroots voices were not heard during the negotiation process, as civil society was excluded from the negotiation. As such, inter-group ethnic divisions and land-related violence remained unaddressed, leaving local communities as vulnerable targets. In a context of fragile peace such as this, it is vital to heal the social fabric that was damaged by war in order to restore trust, which in turn could foster a greater degree of social coexistence and nation-building.

Methodology

The definition of a civil society organization and its role in reconciliation, especially in divided societies, has been analyzed in a wide range of literature. To demonstrate the role of civil society in reconciliation and social repair at a local level, I have compiled a case study of a youth civil society organization in South Sudan. In order to document organizational experiences and accomplishments, I have performed an analysis of reports, reviews, and discussions with UNYDA leaders. In addition, I have provided a literature review that details an essential conceptual framework for this topic.

Conceptual Framework

Once the direct conflict is over, community members who have lived together for centuries, but who have committed acts of violence against each other typically have no
alternative but to remain living together and sharing land and livelihoods:

When violent conflict ends or a harsh totalitarian state collapses, the perpetrators and victims of violence must often resettle together in their communities. This can be immensely difficult when neighbors and even family members have fought on opposite sides of a conflict or attacked each other. The sheer numbers of participants in the violence, the various perceptions of who was in the “right” or in the “wrong” and the presence of struggling state institutions make the pursuit of justice and reconciliation quite complex (Anderlini et al. 2012, 1).

In an ethnically divided society moving beyond individual legal accountability, attaining peace requires addressing collective responsibility, which is essential to repairing the social fabric of the nation. Robust civil society organizations, like youth organizations, have the potential to rebuild a healthy nation.

SOCIAL REPAIR

Social repair is a contextual concept that can take different forms and that has a significant impact on community members by assisting them in moving forward with their lives. It is about rebuilding healthy and non-violent relationships between victims and perpetrators to turn the us/them mentality into a we. Depending on the needs of a given group and how interested they are in healing and reintegration, social repair can take the form of psychological, social, economic, or political empowerment. Weinstein and Fletcher (2002) note that there is both a growing need and interest among different countries to find effective ways of recovering from mass violence. They argue that, although international criminal trials that address individual accountability are important, they only offer one avenue for social repair. Instead, Weinstein and Fletcher (2002) call for a community-based approach to healing; this approach shows how a response to social breakdown addresses the collective processes of social repair by moving beyond individual accountability and addressing collective guilt and collective responsibility.

THE CONCEPT OF PEACE

Peace is not just an end to fighting; it encompasses social and cultural transformation. Galtung distinguishes between negative and positive peace, noting that negative peace is characterized simply by an absence of direct violence—which in itself does not indicate a full and lasting end to conflict—whereas positive peace is present when both structural and cultural violence have been overcome. Top-down peace is a process whose main actor is the international community, whose involvement includes:

Short-term, centralism and political measures primarily undertaken by external agents, even though attention is paid to the consent and support of the indigenous players…While the bottom-up approach to peace is one in which people themselves are empowered as the main actors in political and economical life (Bendaña 2003, 25).

The thesis and lens of this paper is based on “positive peace” that is developed from a “bottom-up” approach.

CIVIL SOCIETY AND SOCIETY REPAIR

Civil society has been described as the collective consciousness of citizens and the
entity occupying the vacuum between the family and the state. More formally, it can be defined as "the assemblage of associations outside of the state and government that would otherwise wish to influence the direction of public affairs including political discourse and action by using and expanding political space" (Wanyande 1996, 6). Goran Hyden points to the importance of civil society as a collective consciousness that has the capacity to make life more meaningful to the people it represents (Oxfam Canada 2002, 10) and whose civil society is uniquely situated to impact processes at both the top and grassroots levels (Hyden 2002).

In the context of a polarized society, civil society is a pre-requisite for social coexistence and social repair. Kimberly Theidon argues that the gap between political leaders and the micro-politics of reconciliation "invites us to consider the extent to which 'democratic transition' and processes of 'national reconciliation' may be little more than the reconfiguration of elite pacts of domination or governability unless these national processes are articulated with social reconstruction at the local level" (2006, 5–6). As conflicts always entail an us versus them mentality, Theidon argues that the crucial challenge in transitional justice is to re-humanize them, thus transforming them into us. In such a polarized context, the fact that communities still possess enormous social capital, which allows them to survive harsh environments and help people realize their latent potential for repairing livelihoods and achieving their own security objectives is often overlooked. Furthermore, violence does not seem to completely take over people's subjectivities; instead, in such contexts, “resisting the oppressor becomes less important than recovery, and the past can matter less than the future” (Last 2000, 370).

However, the role of civil society in general and youth organizations in particular must be understood within the context of the relevant society, and its meaning must be articulated within its political and historical contexts if it is to have any relevance at all. Moving beyond centralism, traditional international top-level interventions and addressing the long-term and short-term objectives led by indigenous actors represent sustainable solutions to the root causes of the conflict (Bendaña 2003, 6). However, the work of civil society does not go without challenges. It has always been difficult for civil society organizations to flourish in both North and South Sudan due to isolation and insecurity. In the war torn region of East Africa in general, civil society faces fewer risks when it is engaged in social and economic matters because its work is “interpreted by the state as complementary and part of nation-building,” while its efforts to work on civil and political matters are “seen as lobby[ing] for changes in the way the state or society operates” (Hyden & Halimaram 2003, 225). This perception exposes the leaders of these organizations to violence, and potentially even torture, by the state authorities.

However, a considerable number of youth activist groups have been willing to take on these risks and engage in socio-politics matters of challenging the us versus them ideology that has fueled the civil war. This is not to say that all CSOs have purely good intentions; indeed, some might actually do more harm than good - either because they lack vision, are beholden to the agendas of the state, or operate under frameworks that sometimes fail to correctly capture and reflect the historical, social, cultural, and political realities of the local communities they are serving.

**THE IMPACT OF THE CONFLICT ON SOUTH SUDANESE YOUTH**
Conflict impacts different population groups differently (Thompson 2007). Generally, in taking part in conflicts to defend the nation, many youths have lost their lives, and a large number of the survivors have suffered extreme damage resulting in disabilities. Furthermore, many more have lost opportunities for education and consequently lack the professional skills that provide access to income and job opportunities. This is true for many countries in Africa, including Sudan and South Sudan.

In 2008, a youth representative of the Sudanese churches addressed an ecumenical solidarity team during their visit to Southern Sudan. In this address, they pointed out that:

The Sudanese youth, especially in the South, were born in the war and became military oriented. The element has rooted to a culture of hatred, hostility and aggressiveness. It is a challenge because the young people would take time to dedicate their energy and eradicate this culture, meanwhile we deplore the fact that in some areas, youth are mobilized to fight in the militias (South Sudan Youth Representative Report, 2).

Where nation-building is still in the making (Sudan and South Sudan), youth are mobilized and called upon as “imagined” defenders and protectors of the nation by politicians in power in both countries. For example, in South Sudan, where 72% of the population are under 30 years old (Ensor 2013), youth are called upon to defend the nation going through crises and risks imposed by rebel groups. In 2012, political leader Paul Akol told South Sudanese youth to unite and defend the nation “I call upon all youth in all bomas, payams, and counties all over the states of South Sudan to unite as one. It’s time to defend the country and you should be ready to do so when called upon,” said Akol, as members applauded.” (Sudan Tribune 2012).

Giddens argues that the way in which youth are socialized defines their post-conflict actions: “in countries where youth serve in the armed forces, militias or the military, they are not only likely to be involved in violence, but also have the technical know-how required to ‘ignite’ war, which once again threatens the polity, the nation, and the order itself” (Tsuma 2009, 128). However, in this paper, I argue that youth, whether they are victims of war or not, are potential actors in peace-building and social reconstruction efforts in divided societies. I will illustrate this premise in the following section, by presenting an example of a youth organization in South Sudan that has and continues to play a crucial role in social repair and social construction in South Sudan.

A Case Study: The Upper Nile Youth Development Association (UNYDA) 2

In order to better understand youth activism’s role in social repair in South Sudan, a case study of UNYDA will be used to illustrate how UNYDA has strategized, engaged with, and challenged the youth’s war mindset, as well as facilitated connections and contributed to the social repair of the youth groups in the Upper Nile State.

UNYDA’s Organizational Profile

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2 Data was collected through personal discussions with UNYDA’s members from July to August 2012, as well as from UNYDA’s internal reports.
Channels of Change

According to one of the leaders of UNYDA, UNYDA is a youth organization that was founded in 1997 in Malakal, which is in the Upper Nile State of South Sudan. UNYDA’s leadership is made up of young professionals (male and female) from different tribes and religions who were fortunate to have had access to varying degrees of education. These passionate young leaders were motivated to act in an environment that had traditionally been hostile to civil society mobilization. Though founded in 1997, UNYDA only formally registered as an NGO in 2003. This delay in registration was largely due to suspicion on the part of government officials (Sudan NCP government) who saw youth civil society organizations like UNYDA as a threat to their own legitimacy at that time. Hence, UNYDA had been forced to work in a very limited civic space until the signing of the CPA, which created more space and freedom for civil society in South Sudan. With support from Oxfam Canada in its early stage, UNYDA was able to build both its institutional and organizational capacity, which later enabled it to expand and reach out to different stakeholders and resource providers.

UNYDA works primarily on building a network of youth associations across the state and transforming the deep-rooted cultural norms and mindsets created by decades of war and instability. The opening up of the political sphere has allowed UNYDA to extend its activities to different counties within the Upper Nile State. UNYDA operates in the Upper Nile region of South Sudan, a region on the border between South Sudan and Sudan. Because of its location, the Upper Nile region bore the brunt of the violence during the civil war/liberation struggle. The Upper Nile State has since become one of the most marginalized and devastated regions in South Sudan because of the presence and activities of militias, harsh environmental conditions, and the state’s proximity to the cultural and military population of the North (UNDP 2012, 2).

UNYDA's Conceptual Framework for Social Repair

AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

During its formation, UNYDA based its conceptualization of social repair on challenging the politics of ethnic division inherited by South Sudan’s youth during civil war (us vs. them), as well as addressing the actual needs and interests of these youth both as actors in, and victims of the civil war. During the North/South Sudan civil war, the government of Sudan adopted political mobilization that was partially shaped by racial/religious affiliations in the name of the ethno-cultural nationalism and nation-building project that is based on racial/religious differences (i.e. “Muslim/Arab” vs. “Christian/African”). However, in their response to fight back against the government of Sudan, some leaders within South Sudan, have attempted to mobilize youth based on ethnic differences. On some occasions, youth mobilized across different ethnicities fought each other when internal conflict erupted within South Sudan between different leaders. As such, they created an us vs. them mentality based on ethnicity that has persisted despite the end of the North/South Sudan civil war.

Hence, UNYDA recognized that engaging with the political element of the conflict was the key first step towards social repair and transforming the lives of youth in the Upper Nile State. UNYDA believes that, in the context of this polarized and divided society, organizational identity matters as much as organizational interventions in addressing the needs and interests of different youth groups. UNYDA went through a process of bringing together youth from
organizational interventions in addressing the needs and interests of different youth groups. UNYDA went through a process of bringing together youth from different backgrounds (i.e. ethnic, political, gender, and religious) in order to forge a common identity that reflects diversity. Organizational leaders wanted UNYDA to be seen by the community “as a model of how different identities can form a common national identity, and how diversity can be (a) strength rather than weakness and a source of peace rather than war and division” (author’s interview with Charles Judo 2012).

To create a common national identity amongst differences, the organization has to overcome deep mistrust from youths with regards to its inner motives. However, UNYDA manages this mistrust through initiatives that are focused on diversity, continuous dialogue, and collective action, as well as ensures that its team members represent different identities in all of its activities and community outreach efforts. In addition, UNYDA ensures that its activities reach out to a wide variety of the region's communities, which has been a difficult process characterized by both progress and setbacks. Members of the organization represent different tribes, enabling the organization to navigate uneasiness among youth from different groups. Indeed, UNYDA's ability to reach out to youth from all tribes has enabled it to become a model for unity across differences (UNYDA Report 2010, 3).

This brilliant strategy represents a real challenge for the brand of identity politics that had been employed during civil war. UNYDA has challenged the “divide and rule” approach to identity politics employed during the civil war, and has made considerable progress in freeing youth from their dichotomous wartime mindset by engaging them in a dialogue that addresses the issues of peace, development, and social healing. This discourse has helped the youth to reshape their individual social and political identities into a new common national identity.

**AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL**

In order to contribute to political, social, and economic repair, UNYDA designed its interventions to address the needs and interests of the region's youth in their dual identities as both victims/survivors and actors in the war. In a polarized and divided society, the process of how the services are delivered is equally important as an organization's identity and its reflection of the diversity in the community. This is relevant with regards to using repair to address the different components of the system that gave rise to a given conflict. Consequently, UNYDA has designed its activities for different youth in a way that facilitates the coming together of youth across differences while responding to their unique needs and interests. In this sense, UNYDA’s social repair activities are not only service delivery, they also contain aspects of political transformation and social transformation.

UNYDA creates a space where youth (female and male) from different ethnic and religious backgrounds can come together to overcome differences and to interconnect by facilitating dialogue aimed at changing mindsets inherited from the war regarding development issues concerning youth in their counties. In addition, these discourses also aim to help young entrepreneurs across differences gain access to new ideas.

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3 Charles Judo was the secretary general of UNYDA.
SUPPORTS THE INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY OF VOLUNTARY YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS AT THE COUNTY LEVEL

Through skills training, the dissemination of organizational development materials, and the provision of small operational grants to its member organizations at the county level, UNYDA helps mobilize youth as agents of change by creating a space where they can reflect on how they can move towards the future and take advantage of the space made available by the CPA.

UNYDA awards its grants with a goal of creating space for local youth groups from different tribes to develop a culture of diversity and peace as well as collective accountability. UNYDA encourages local groups (who had been mobilized by different factions in the conflict) to develop organizational identities that are independent from prior political and tribal affiliations in order to give rise to a multi-voice civil society that fosters the values of diversity and peaceful co-existence. Youth associations at the county level are set up in a simple way that enables them to establish dialogues between different groups of youths and to organize awareness-raising activities relating to issues that are relevant to youth who are adjusting to post-war life (for example, prioritizing HIV education and gender-based violence using MDGs as an advocacy platform).

FACILITATES EDUCATION

UNYDA has been particularly proactive in the area of education, especially in addressing the education of girls. Many girls and women never get an opportunity to attend school due to the impact of war on the female population and the cultural notion that it is useless to educate girls. In response, UNYDA established a girls’ education campaign at both the community and decision-making level. UNYDA employed gender-action learning in order to build community consciousness and awareness regarding gender equality in education.

ORGANIZES DIALOGUES WITH THE TRADITIONAL LEADERS AND YOUTH OF COMMUNITIES THAT ARE VICTIMS AND/OR PERPETRATORS OF TRIBAL VIOLENCE

In its efforts to heal and unite divided communities, UNYDA creates spaces for dialogue where traditional leaders and youth from different tribes can come together and reflect on the best ways to move forward. One example of UNYDA’s interventions was a community-healing workshop they hosted in Malakal in 2009 that was intended to alleviate some of the tensions that still existed between the Colo and Dinka tribes. Furthermore, this workshop was facilitated together with the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR), and it brought together traditional leaders, youth, women, and other civil society stakeholders from different tribes (Nuer, Colo, Shilluk, and Dinka). The following account of the workshop was provided by one of the UNYDA’s executive committee members:

The process was unfolding rather well until the South African facilitators engaged the participants in drawing the map of their respective counties. The chiefs misunderstood the exercise and turned sullen (as land has been a cause of tension). They feared that the drawing of the Malakal county could re-ignite tensions. They turned their back and refused to take part in the exercise. The whole process came to a standstill. Some chiefs were clearly upset and started shouting and blaming UNYDA for having a hidden agenda. Then the facilitators opened up the space for others to intervene. Ódong
Mayik, one of the UNYDA’s members stood up and politely reminded the chiefs that the facilitators came from a society that had experienced deep and bloody racial divisions between blacks and whites, which were eventually overcome. “This is why they are here with us today”. Then the UNYDA member started singing a song written by Gordon Kong, a famous blind singer from Southern Sudan praising what unites Sudanese along the Nile. Odonk started singing, he gestured the group to stand up and join him. The chiefs sang along beating the rhythm with their hands. When finished, much of the tension had gone and the workshop facilitators carried forward (UNYDA Report 2010, 31).

This anecdote clearly indicates how the UNYDA handles the mistrust and tensions surrounding its determination to challenge the politics of difference. Many UNYDA members received tension management training both in Sudan and outside of Sudan, including South Africa. The UNYDA’s approach to managing tensions is to facilitate a process that is oriented to ultimately allowing people to move forward, since the CPA lacked any significant measures for addressing the past, leaving grievances of people who were affected by the civil war unaddressed. However, it is worth noting that, working with such a framework was not an easy process for UNYDA, yet UNYDA’s members showed great resilience and determination in rebuilding the nation.

ACTS AS AN INTERMEDIARY BETWEEN YOUTH VICTIMS & RESOURCE PROVIDERS TO HELP VICTIMS RESUME NORMAL LIVES

The UNYDA mentors groups of young war victims (with physical disabilities caused by gun violence or landmines) and helps connect them with relevant resource providers. For instance, a group of young people who had been handicapped by landmines approached the UNYDA to help them organize themselves into a group (called the Malakal Mobile Theatre Team (MMTT) which UNYDA also hosted. Not only did UNYDA’s help save them from having to go through the long civil society registration process stipulated by government, but it also helped the group gain access to resources from different donors, including UNICEF, which has helped many of these survivors in their healing journey.

It is clear that, besides challenging a political identity that is based on an us vs. them mentality towards the formation of a new identity that reflects the organization’s diversity as a strategy, UNYDA’s
WHAT DOES SOCIAL REPAIR MEAN FOR UNDYA?

UNYDA’s approach to social repair addresses the political, social, and economic levels of the system, which were all part of the process that led to violence. UNYDA sees social repair as more than just addressing the practical needs of youth affected by war. Its definition of social repair and approach is predicated upon challenging the politics of difference (divide and rule) that gave rise to war. Recognizing the social and political community divisions that had been deepened by the war, UNYDA engaged itself in a process of identity formation that would represent youths from a variety of ethnic, gender, and religious identities. At the social and economic levels, UNYDA has engaged in breaking down the isolation of youth from different tribes and from religions outside political and traditional life by creating spaces for dialogue, providing access to information and skill development, and harnessing the influence of traditional leaders. UNYDA has also engaged in addressing the practical and strategic needs of young women and men who have been affected by war. Some examples of these needs include education, HIV treatment and awareness, access to income, as well as the connection of youth groups with special needs with resource providers.

UNDYA TODAY

The current destruction taking place in South Sudan impacts UNYDA both as an organization as well as in regard to its individual members, most of whom are forced to flee the Upper Nile city of Malakal to different counties or to Juba. Still, members of UNYDA have shown great resilience in maintaining social fabric through different interventions and work strategies within various affected counties in the Upper Nile State. Different members of UNYDA, though physically separated, have maintained a strong organizational presence through their operations in different counties and displaced persons camps. Currently, UNYDA has expanded its web of relationships at the national level with state authorities, local government and other international organizations, reaching out to different communities and youth groups.

Conclusion

In a context where local communities that share the same land become polarized and mobilized along ethnic lines to fuel national conflict, they may find it difficult to heal, reconcile with each other and forge a common identity and a common future. This is especially true in cases where a political top-down “negative peace” framework was used to end the conflict, like the CPA. In such a context, where there were no mechanisms in place to redress the past, youth, who are mostly called upon their services to defend and protect the nation, are well situated to do so during peacetime. Youth and youth organizations have the potential to heal the social fabric that was damaged by war, restore trust, which in turn could foster a greater degree of social coexistence and nation-building.

In an effort to rebuild the social fabric in South Sudan that was damaged by the civil war, Upper Nile Youth Development’s strategy focused on the formation of organizational identity that challenges the politics of difference and polarization in their community by uniting as a diverse group of youth across ethnicities, political affiliations, religion, and gender. This approach of diversity in representation, both in the organization’s executive board and in the process of delivering services to the community, represents a strong and alternatives model of governance.
by re-imagining confluence of the people of South Sudan as an ethnically and tribally diverse, yet unified nation. Ultimately, this paper provides evidence to suggest that state-led nation-building efforts in South Sudan should pay special attention to the role of youth and strategize to align their inclusion in any efforts to end the current violence, rebuild the social fabric that hold the nation, and achieve sustainable “positive peace” in South Sudan.
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