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People-to-people peacemaking and peacebuilding: A review of the work of the New Sudan Council of Churches

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Titus Agwanda and Geoff Harris

Introduction

Sudan has been the scene of civil wars and associated catastrophes for the past fifty years. The origins, progression and effects of these wars have been studied by various scholars.¹ In brief, military regimes favouring northern Islamic-oriented governments over non-Islamic, non-Arab southern Sudanese have dominated national politics since the country's independence in 1956, resulting in two long-running civil wars. The first ended in 1972 with an agreement which granted the south a degree of regional autonomy but war broke out again in 1983, emphasising the large gap between the official discourses of peace and the unofficial pursuit of political and economic domination by armed violence. As many as two million people died from war and famine during this second civil war. The comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) signed in 2005 provides

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for southern autonomy until 2011, when a referendum on independence is due to be held. A separate war which broke out in Darfur in 2003 has resulted in between 200 000 and 400 000 deaths. As we shall discuss later, the larger political struggle has fostered a culture of violence in intra- and inter-community conflicts.

The New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) has a long history of involvement in these conflicts, which is documented in the above references and several of its own publications.² This article focuses on the period since the 1997 dialogues held between NSCC and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). These dialogues resulted in the NSCC receiving the backing of the SPLM and other political movements to move across ethnic and political lines in order to promote reconciliation between southern Sudanese groups.³ The SPLA/M recognised the NSCC as a neutral body with special responsibilities to serve the people of southern Sudan, making it the natural facilitator of community-level dialogue between conflicting factions.⁴ This mandate was reinforced in 1998 at a meeting held in Lokichogio between Nilotic leaders from the East and West Banks of the Nile and church leaders. This meeting gave traditional leaders the opportunity to give their own mandate to the NSCC to advance and guide the peace process and marked the birth of the people-to-people peacemaking (PTP) process, 'a deliberate and facilitated process that encourages communities, leaders and people involved in conflict situations to reach agreements among themselves for stopping conflicts, achieving reconciliation and promoting healing, peace and justice among and for people in their communities'.⁵ Following this meeting, PTP conferences began and over forty dialogues have subsequently been facilitated by the NSCC.

The aims of this article are to explain the principles and practices of the PTP peacemaking process; to argue the case for greater NSCC emphasis on peacebuilding; and to make recommendations to the NSCC concerning its future peacemaking/peacebuilding work.

The people-to-people peacemaking process

PTP is based on the principle that the responsibility for peace rests with individuals and communities themselves. For the PTP process to work, then, the desire for peace by people involved in a conflict must be supplemented by an acceptance of this responsibility.⁶

The approach recognises that ethnic conflicts are fuelled by negative attitudes and perceptions which perpetuate distrust, misunderstanding and division and emphasises that these can only be tackled by fostering dialogue between those involved in conflict. The emphasis on dialogue draws on the history of the people of southern Sudan, who prior to external influences – primarily the Sudanese government and the increasing availability of more deadly weapons – relied on processes of dialogue between chiefs, elders and community members to address important community issues and to undertake conflict

resolution.⁷ The use of traditional conflict resolution procedures in the PTP process is not to maintain the status quo but to facilitate mutually agreeable solutions to conflicts.

PTP experience has shown that dialogue is central in helping parties reach a common understanding of the conflicts in which they are involved and the appropriate collective action to be taken; in so doing, it has built connectedness between the parties. Two major examples were the inter- and intra-ethnic conferences of Wunlit (the Nuer-Dinka Peace and Reconciliation Conference held at Bahr el Ghazal, 27 February – 7 March 1999) and the East Bank People to People Peace and Reconciliation Conference (held at Liliir, 9–15 May 2000). The latter produced the Liliir Covenant between the Anyuak, Dinka, Jie, Kachip, Murle and Nuer, an agreement which is basically holding despite persistent problems and skirmishes.

Overall, the PTP dialogues have been effective vehicles for building the desire for peace, stopping fighting, building understanding and cooperation, commencing practical steps to build peace in communities, establishing peace councils and border courts and facilitating reconciliation. Indeed, this process of peacemaking must be viewed as a critical foundation for subsequent peacebuilding, that is, the building of social, political and economic structures and processes which address the underlying causes of conflict.

The PTP process, peacemaking and peace agreements

The mission of NSCC explicitly includes advocacy for human rights and the promotion of unity, equality and peace among the diverse peoples of southern Sudan. Like a herder of livestock, the NSCC has been 'leading from behind' in the process of peace and justice by facilitating dialogue between those seeking peace with the objective of securing a peace agreement.

The NSCC's broad understanding of peace is close to that of *shalom* in Hebrew, which implies well-being, prosperity and security premised on just social, political and economic institutions.⁸ This is similar to the concept of peace developed by Johan Galtung, which includes negative peace (the absence of direct violence) and also positive peace – the minimising of structural violence which arises from social, political and economic structures which favour some groups and disadvantage others and thus provides a foundation for conflict and violence. Both a reduction in absolute poverty and inequality are important, based on the premise that people whose needs are met are likely to be less hostile to each other and more willing to work together to expand the gains of peace.⁹ This requires more than peacemaking, which traditionally implies the use of diplomatic means to persuade parties in conflict to cease hostilities and to negotiate a peaceful settlement of their dispute.

A review of the PTP process, characterised by its trademark conferences, shows that it has been largely concerned with peacemaking. In this task it has managed to avoid a major weakness of traditional peacemaking that Galtung has described as ‘the single-shot high table at the top for the leaders’,¹⁰ which restricts the process to the participation of a few people. On the contrary, PTP has invested much effort in ensuring that communities as well as their leaders are involved in the conferences and the subsequent peace agreements.

The PTP process has four main stages:

- The awareness stage, in which the demand for peace is built
- The strategy development phase, in which peace strategies are proposed and debated
- The adoption of the peace agreement
- The consolidation phase, in which an effort is made to implement the peace agreement and build a sustainable peace

The second and third of these occur largely through dialogues held during peace conferences, the main vehicle used in the PTP process. The NSCC acknowledges that a peace conference is only an event whose outcomes – peace agreements and new relationships – cannot be sustained without further contributions, for example enhancing the capacity of communities to sustain the negotiated peace, to improve development and service provision, and to encourage reconciliation.¹¹ Attempts to integrate such components into the PTP can be seen in the provisions for peace consolidation under the fourth stage. Steps under this phase include the wide dissemination of the details of a peace agreement and the establishment of peace committees to follow up, monitor and strengthen the agreement, and generally promote peace-enhancing activities. Much peace consolidation work has the potential to be synonymous with peacebuilding and conflict transformation processes.

Peacebuilding: the consolidation of peace agreements

It is now widely accepted that horizontal inequalities – inequalities of income and wealth with a strong ethnic element – are very often significant underlying causes of conflict.¹² Peacebuilding involves tackling this type of structural violence through the long-term transformation of economic, political and social systems so as to create relationships based on equity and justice. The tasks of peacebuilding are thus synonymous with those of development; it emphasises the importance of reducing the underlying causes of conflict and thereby the likelihood of violent conflict breaking out. Peacebuilding can

perform either a conflict-prevention function or a post-conflict recovery function, on both. The question is the extent to which the NSCC has engaged in the consolidating work of peacebuilding.

The NSCC has indeed spent a considerable amount of its resources on education (for example provision of materials to primary schools) and health programmes, as well as development and rehabilitation programmes in partnership with the NGO Christian Ecumenical Action in Sudan (CEAS), for example building schools and health facilities and sinking boreholes.¹³ However, the NSCC's activities between 2003 and 2006 have largely focused on peacemaking, as its various reports¹⁴ make clear. This emphasis may place important limitations on the overall effectiveness of the NSCC's work.

Nathan¹⁵ has identified a number of reasons why mediation efforts in Africa have frequently not resulted in a sustainable peace and Hartwell¹⁶ examines the role of 'spoilers' in the reoccurrence of fighting which often erupts just after a peace agreement has been signed. Our emphasis here concerns the longer term and is related to the argument of Brand-Jacobsen and Jacobsen:¹⁷ peace agreements often fail because they are not supported by significant attention to the underlying causes of a conflict which, as we have seen, often involve ethnically based inequalities. A recent evaluation of the NSCC's peace and justice programme by the Local Capacities for Peace Project¹⁸ largely fails to identify the weakness of this link in the work of the NSCC. In its conclusion, however, it does recognise that peacemaking without accompanying peacebuilding cannot result in a just and lasting peace and recommends that the NSCC channel peacebuilding work to appropriate bodies:

A quick fix does obviously not solve the underlying problems, and very often one incident of violating the accord is enough to make fighting erupt again ... [A] peace process is not an event, but a long process with different stages. Such a process does not end with the signing of an agreement, since it requires locally-owned follow-up structures to guard the peace. This means that there is need for capacity building of the respective representatives, not only in issues of reconciliation and justice, but also with competence in addressing other needs of the communities. Social services and trauma-healing are two of the most frequently mentioned subjects in this respect. This does not mean that members of peace councils and peace committees should now engage in development activities, but they need to be enabled to channel such requests effectively, so that the peace 'pays off'.¹⁹

The need for comprehensive peacebuilding

Societal conflicts are inevitable whenever scarce resources are unequally distributed between groups. In the case of southern Sudan, the problem is compounded by a

multiplicity of divisive factors such as cultural, ethnic and religious issues. The first independent Sudan population census (1955–1956) reported that seven major ethnic groups inhabited Sudan. They were subdivided into 46 smaller groups that spoke different languages and followed different religious creeds. Over 70 per cent of the population lives in rural areas. Inter-group competition over natural resources is even more acute and conflict-generating in southern Sudan because of the prevailing mode of living which can be described as ‘traditional rain-fed agriculture and livestock raising’. Clashes between farmers and nomadic herdsmen have long occurred and are increasing along with the increase in human and animal populations. Furthermore, although all of rural Sudan is relatively underdeveloped, the rural parts of southern and western Sudan are even more so. Rural populations in those areas still manifest cultures and behaviour patterns of traditional communities (such as identity group solidarity, the warrior male image, or the tradition of taking revenge).

Traditional methods of conflict resolution were well developed.²⁰ The Nuer and the Dinka, the two largest ethnic groups in the south, traditionally moved through each other’s areas to water their cattle. They lived side by side for generations, with well-understood traditional borders and extensive cooperation between the tribes. Although one group occasionally raided the other’s livestock, they avoided full-scale conflicts, at least until the civil war resumed in 1983. A shared understanding of conflict ensured that fighting, if it did break out, did not become too fierce or destructive. Women, children, the elderly and sick and unarmed people from the opposing side were not targeted; crops, property and homesteads were not damaged.²¹ Traditional conflict resolution methods were practised, including story telling, the sharing of past wounds and rituals for reconciliation, all built on a common commitment to peace. This experience accords with studies of the nature and effectiveness of traditional African conflict-resolution methods.²² Over the years, however, the patterns of conflict have changed. Inter- and intra-community conflicts have become more sophisticated and devastating as a result of outside influences and the proliferation of modern weapons. Armed conflicts now frequently involve the aggressive targeting of any member of the opposing group and the destruction of their property and environment. Under these circumstances, as we argue later, the effectiveness of traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms is under threat.

The struggle against the northern government resulted in a spirit of unity and comradeship and preoccupied many southern communities. Following the signing of the CPA in 2005, some of that energy has been diverted into inter- and intra-community conflicts, supported by several other factors. Twenty years of civil war has left behind a culture of violence where destruction and retribution are seen as the norm and the arms used during the civil war are available for use in the inter- and intra-community conflicts. Many communities are characterised by resource shortages, poor access to services, and idle and armed ex-fighters who can easily turn to cattle raiding within and without their communities. The absence of effective justice systems means that there is little or no deterrent effect.

The prolonged war and the inter- and intra-community conflicts together have resulted in the destruction of physical, social, economic and political infrastructure, poverty, food insecurity, deaths and injuries, the breakdown of family structures, loss of trust and broken relationships and an increase in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs).²³ A reasonable prospect of peace is a necessary condition for the return of refugees and IDPs but may not be sufficient, given the poverty of their communities and the lack of basic services. The return of people means increased competition for limited resources such as water points and pasture land which may already be inadequate for the host communities. They may well be suffering from trauma and may be subject to stigma and reproach for having left in the first place.

Moreover, the many years of conflict in Sudan has created various types of current and ex-combatants who can be variously identified as rebels, militias, bandits, rogues, and terrorists who have gained certain benefits from the conflict. As a result, the signing of the CPA has already produced spoilers who, as Hartwell states, 'exist only when there is a peace process to undermine'.²⁴ The spoilers in southern Sudan can emanate from many sources, including various rebel factions who feel that they have not been given the degree of recognition accorded to SPLA/M; militias who have control over certain territories and have the backing of the Khartoum government; armed cattle camp youth groups (*gelwongs*) formerly used by both the SPLA and the Khartoum government to protect villages under them; and 'bandits, rouges and terrorists'. As Hartwell²⁵ argues, peace creates spoilers because 'it is rare in civil wars for all leaders and factions to see peace as beneficial and even if all parties come to value peace, they rarely do so simultaneously, and they often strongly disagree over the terms of an acceptable peace'. If such groups perceive that the outcomes from the CPA may not be in their best personal or political interests, they may lose hope and use violence in attempts to undermine the agreement. A successful transition from war to peace therefore requires that parties to a conflict who benefit from violence are able to benefit to a greater extent from peace.

Addressing this kind of situation requires comprehensive peacebuilding efforts which go beyond single-track peacemaking initiatives. Given the changing circumstances within southern Sudan – such as the prospect of the return of refugees and IDPs, the widespread lack of infrastructure and social facilities, poverty, illiteracy and food insecurity – peacemaking alone will not suffice. As the NSCC clearly recognises,²⁶ sustainable peace and genuine reconciliation is only possible when basic human needs of the conflict parties are met. It follows that addressing the basic needs and concerns of the people before attempting to build forgiveness and reconciliation is an essential step on the road to sustainable peace.

The challenges facing the NSCC's capacity to effectively support peacebuilding was recognised by the NSCC²⁷ and later by the LCPP,²⁸ which recommended that

the organisation should establish partnerships and networks to try to ensure that peacebuilding did occur. This intention, however, seems to always be overshadowed by the peace agreement and the establishment of peacemaking structures such as peace councils and committees. In practice, PTP remains a single-track system with emphasis on peacemaking of the kind scholars now commonly refer to as track II activities – that is, non-official and non-coercive activities such as consultation and facilitation conducted in the form of problem-solving peace conferences and workshops. While PTP has had impressive successes, we can identify six important constraints which it faces.

The first two of these have already been discussed. First, traditional conflict resolution processes are facing challenges from non-traditional conflicts and/or more intense traditional conflicts. Second, peacemaking without a strong complementary peacebuilding component may not result in sustained peace because the underlying causes may remain. Third, PTP requires heavy significant input from specialists in order to reach a successful peace agreement, to establish the local councils and committees to implement and monitor it, and to train the members of these bodies. Fourth, traditional culture both constrains and promotes conflict. Respect for leadership and traditions of restoration and forgiveness clearly support peacemaking and peacebuilding work, but there is also a strong desire for revenge among the Dinka and Nur as well as a culture of cattle rustling and theft. Fifth, many peace agreements are built on certain conditions or the provision of certain services, often by government, and their fulfilment is frequently outside the control of the NSCC and the PTP process. Finally, there can be important gaps in the recovery process and in the provision of justice which may impede the establishment of better relations between the parties to a conflict. The ending of armed conflict is likely to depend, among other things, on the disarming of ex-combatants, restoration of the rule of law and an effective process – whether based on retributive or restorative justice – to deal with the perpetrators of crime and other human rights abuses. It is recognised²⁹ that without the rule of law and an effective police and court system, the sustainability of peace is fragile. Revenge as a means of justice will lead to continued lawlessness, human rights abuses and cattle rustling, thereby jeopardising the chances of sustainable peace.

Recommendations on peacebuilding by the NSCC

We have noted the current emphasis on peacemaking in NSCC work and emphasised the importance of a process of peacebuilding. In this section, we spell out some important peacebuilding activities for consideration by the NSCC. We have mentioned earlier recommendations that NSCC ensure that peacebuilding occur by networking and partnering. This does not seem to have been successful and there seems to be a case for the NSCC to protect and enhance its peacemaking activities by engaging directly in peacebuilding.

In the third section, we presented the four main stages in PTP's peacemaking work, of which the fourth – consolidating and sustaining peace – points to peacebuilding. We can identify four stages in the peacebuilding process:

- Encouragement of communities and stakeholders to accept the importance of peacebuilding as a complement to peacemaking
- A decision by communities and stakeholders to engage in peacebuilding and on the organisational processes to be followed
- Discussion and agreement on specific projects and programmes
- Implementation of cooperative action and monitoring its progress

We offer seven specific peacebuilding activities for consideration by the NSCC, presented roughly in the sequence in which they could be carried out:

- Dealing with the psychological and physical traumas of war
- Building the rule of law
- Encouraging community discussion concerning traditional attitudes and practices which encourage conflict and violence
- Disarming ex-combatants and reintegrating them into civilian life
- Promoting income-earning opportunities
- Deciding what to do about the past
- Building friendships between previous enemies, including the encouragement of forgiveness and reconciliation

Much has been written on each of these seven activities³⁰ and we will comment only on the second last – how to deal with a bad past. Under the broad headings of retributive and restorative justice, there are various ways available,³¹ ranging from amnesia (pretending that it did not happen) through to truth commissions. Nations and communities need to decide which approach they wish to follow, hopefully built on a commitment to the rule of law. The important principle is that the past is dealt with in a way that is acceptable to most of the community. If not, past injustices can easily provoke new cycles of violence, vigilante justice and revenge, and peace agreements will not hold. Finally, it is important to note that the seven peacebuilding activities listed above call for high levels

of skill, wisdom and experience and this needs to be built over time. This will start with peacebuilders employed by the NSCC and hopefully will transfer to community peacebuilding committees and individuals.

Notes

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