Development in a Time of War:
South Sudan’s Renewed Conflict and Its Toll
Upon Development Prospects for the Region

Justin Leach
Troy University, Troy, USA

This paper is an adaptation of a presentation given on March 20, 2015, at the Conference on International Development hosted by Virginia International University. The paper reviews the December 2013 outbreak of civil war in South Sudan, and attempts to untangle the country’s pre-existing development problems from those more directly related to the war. Finally, the paper discusses international involvement both in South Sudan’s development and conflict resolution. It focuses in particular on the international debate over methods to end the conflict, the importance of state capacity, and the international understanding of development’s relationship with the conflict.

Keywords: South Sudan, civil war, development, China in Africa, USA in Africa

Introduction

South Sudan has notable economic potential due primarily to its abundance of natural resources, yet it remains one of the least developed countries on earth, with an uncertain future. The region has seen several decades of warfare going back to the founding of the Republic of Sudan in 1956. The first war between Khartoum and the south ended in 1972 and peace of a sort remained in place until the early 1980s, with war formally breaking out again in 1983. This second war ended in 2005, and after an interim period South Sudan gained its independence in July 2011. It was a short while before that country went to war with itself in December 2013. Only in recent months media sources begun referring to this conflict as a civil war, though by most measurements it has long since approached that definition. While there are multiple players in both the political and military dimensions of this war, two dominant factions are involved in most of the fighting: the governing party of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the rebel Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO).

This paper discusses key grievances of these factions’ elites and constituencies, as well as their relationship with South Sudan’s ongoing development problems. While it is commonly understood in literature on African conflict resolution that disputes over the nature of development are often fundamentally intertwined with the motivations for conflict, this review of the civil war until the period of early 2015 seeks to more clearly isolate pre-existing development problems from those associated with the war since its December 2013 outbreak. The paper also seeks to describe the nature of international involvement by examining the roles that
international parties play in conflict, in conflict resolution, and in various approaches of development.

**A Political Dispute Transformed into Communal Violence**

South Sudan is still the world’s newest state. It came about after the interim period put in place as part of the agreement ending the second civil war, a grinding, two-decade long affair that killed two million people. The war was almost a model for African insurgent conflict in that it was typically low intensity and seasonally fought. In the rainy season, the lush tropical growth allowed rebels more cover under which to launch strikes and make gains in the countryside, while the impassibility of roads hampered the government response. In the dry season, tree cover became scarcer and roads more traversable, so the government would launch its counter-offensive (Leach, 2013, p. 30). Though the fighting is low intensity, it is widespread enough to disrupt most development efforts.

These trends appear to be going on in the current conflict as well. Fighting is centered around the northeast of the country, though violence has been seen in every state at some point. This area is predominantly populated by the Nuer, the second largest ethnic group in South Sudan (15% of the population). The largest ethnicity and that of President Salva Kiir is the Dinka (36% of the population). Former Vice President Riek Machar, a Nuer, has a history of taking to conflict in the name of his ethnic group. However, it is important to distinguish the grievances of elites from those of participants in communal violence on the ground. We do not see the same ethnic schism at the top level. Quite a few Dinka elites and those of other ethnicities have sided with the former Vice President and many Nuer elites, notably in the military, remained loyal to the government after the initial outbreak of hostilities (Vanang, 2014). The war is best thought of as a power struggle in Juba that has metastasized outward and split along the easiest fault lines present, which in South Sudan happen to be ethnic. But this conflict is, almost from the outset, a different one from the political dispute that began it.

The conflict started in December 2013, six months after Vice President Machar had been dismissed from his office by Kiir. Until that point, he had been not only second in command of South Sudan but also an important figure in the SPLM/A, the governing party that had previously been the dominant insurgent group in the war against Khartoum. The beginning of that month saw unusually belligerent statements from officials at party meetings, and eventually loud outbursts between President Kiir’s faction and Machar’s supporters. Soon after, violent activity commenced at a nearby military base (Leach, 2014). There have been multiple charges over the nature of this violence and whether it was a coup or a counter coup. It is widely agreed, however, that a period of targeted killings of Nuer citizens in Juba by soldiers loyal to the government followed, incidents which helped charge the power struggle with ethnic violence. Almost immediately following, a revolt erupted among those expressing a loyalty to what became the Machar faction SPLM in opposition (SPLM-IO).

The violence then moved out of Juba and Equatoria into the northern part of the country, specifically towards the regions shared by the two key ethnic groups in Upper Nile, Jonglei, and Unity states. These states have been hit hardest by the conflict and the surrounding chaos it has generated. Food insecurity has been particularly pronounced. Early concerns about a famine thankfully were not substantiated, but prolonged food insecurity in Jonglei state and the southern parts of Unity state keeps the area at risk.

Hilde Johnson, who served as both the former head of the UN mission to South Sudan and Norwegian Minister for Development, has been working in the region for years and summarized the situation in 2014 by assessing that this conflict has set back development for decades in a part of the world that never knew much to begin with (Johnson, 2014). The severity of the conflict should be measured not only in terms of the immediate
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fatalities, but the hardships it has created in terms of the ability of the communities involved to even talk to each other. Without that common element of trust between many of these communities, it will be harder to get sustained development efforts off the ground and prevent recurring violence.

While conflict may have prevented a number of planned development efforts in South Sudan, development in the region by various NGOs has a long history. Many participants to conflict have internalized the language of these groups and the importance of development generally to local communities. However, for all its discussion by parties on all sides of the conflict, development does not appear to be fundamentally what the conflict is about. One indicator that this is primarily a contest between elites not grounded in wider concerns is to examine the priority of issues being discussed in the negotiations attempted to date at ending the conflict. These talks have failed many times now, but the topics being haggled over are not the high-minded concerns of integrated regional economic programs. To be sure, there is much discussion of government disenfranchisement of local communities (appealing to SPLM-IO and Nuer concerns) and of Nuer hoarding of oil wealth (the concerns of Dinka and other ethnicities). Negotiation rounds have been far more focused on power sharing in the government, integrating military factions. Much disagreement has centered on rebel soldiers’ demands to be reintegrated at a higher rank than that they left the army with, to have whole rebel units reintegrated rather than individuals, and to have a fully separate army for a period of time (Radio Tamazuj, 2015; Sudan Tribune, 2015, March 10). Development talk may come up quickly at press events, but not at the actual discussions. It is a disconnect between public rhetoric and private negotiation.

Development Issues in a Time of Upheaval

It is important when reviewing development efforts in South Sudan to get some perspective on the challenge. The World Bank estimates that 83% of the South Sudanese population is rural. Only 27% of South Sudanese over 15 years old are literate, and there is a notable gender disparity here: Males are at about 40% and females are at 16%. Eighty percent of South Sudanese have no access to toilet facilities of any kind (World Bank, 2015). South Sudan is one of the poorest countries in the world. It is isolated from the global economy even by African standards, and often at war. There are still positive aspects to South Sudan’s demographic composition with relation to the current conflict, however. Because it is such a rural country, most of the fighting—which has been taking place in towns—has not affected as many people directly as it might in more developed countries. Unfortunately, these urban areas are typically where development programs often will be initiated and organized. Elements of civil society and NGOs that could be involved have fled the fighting. Many people have left permanently as cities switch hands between the government and rebels so many times residents no longer want to wait for a faction more accommodating to them to remain in place. Key areas around Sudanese border, towns like Bentiu and Malakal, have changed hands several times within the last year (Warner, 2014). There is no stability within these cities critical to any national development program: Bentiu is near the oil fields South Sudan will rely on for the economy and Malakal is a vital Nile port.

The situation in Malakal speaks to another defining tendency of this conflict: the effect it has had on transportation in many parts of the country. It is worth noting that within the first six months of conflict, only one barge convoy made it from the capital of Juba north to Malakal (World Vision, 2014, p. 15). This is a striking halt to domestic trade as the Nile has typically been a dependable artery of traffic during even the more unstable periods. When roads were bad or non-existent in the rest of the country, trade and other movement could still take place along the river. The freezing of this and other key trade routes has contributed to a
potential agricultural catastrophe. People are not able to go to rural markets or coordinate with others to get the seeds they need. A survey from Upper Nile indicates that 35% of households in that state did not plant seeds due to the conflict (World Vision, 2014, p. 8). In a part of the country where food insecurity is already high, this does not bode well for the future.

The difficulty of travel back and forth has only encouraged many people to pool their resources and leave for very long periods, at least until the violence subsides. Massive internal displacement has occurred throughout South Sudan. Tens of thousands of refugees have fled to Ethiopia, Uganda, and even Sudan, where there are still hard feelings from the period before the South’s independence. Dinka and Nuer rural markets have been most affected by the violence, but there are variations of this system throughout the country. Traders will typically coordinate with chiefs or local figures as to where country markets are to be established. Many chiefs either fled or relocated to join the government or rebels when the fighting began, thus upending these contact systems. Some staple crops such as sorghum have seen their price triple. This is the real economy for most people, a world away from the oil fields that generate most government revenue.

And yet, access to oil revenue is a key element both to continuation of the conflict and to South Sudan’s development generally. The presence of oil fields in South Sudan’s northern states was a promising element in another modest economic situation. The division of oil revenues was one of the many issues fought over and eventually negotiated during the second Sudanese civil war. South Sudan, however, has barely had the opportunity to take advantage of this resource since independence. Almost immediately upon its becoming an independent state, a fight erupted between Juba and Khartoum over transit fees through the pipelines used to get the oil across Sudan to the North and then to the Red Sea. A number of countries were regular importers of Sudan’s oil before 2011 and hope to continue this relationship with Juba, China most notably. Oil revenue has been counted on to compose 98% of the funding for South Sudan’s budget. Since independence, the country has been able to take full advantage of this resource for only a few months in 2013. That March, an agreement was reached with Khartoum regarding transit fees. By December, the hostilities that had broken out in Juba compromised the government’s access to the oil fields significantly, though some fields had already been abandoned due to the regional insecurity. The 45% drop in international oil prices since the summer of 2014 means whatever modest amount South Sudan has been able to get to market is earning even less in revenue than before the conflict (Baroux, 2015). There is some concern for the future with how Juba is paying for the war effort, and little accountability by the government. South Sudan is one of the least transparent governments on earth, ranking 171 out of 175 countries measured by one measurement (Transparency International, 2015).

**Emerging International Involvement in Resolution of the Conflict**

Hilde Johnson suggests the insular nature of the SPLM/A government with regard to non-party members has also made it difficult for regional organizations to resolve the conflict, as they had been instrumental in doing so during the past wars (Johnson, 2014). The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a collective regional development and security organization that provided the forum which ended Sudan’s second civil war, has staged multiple forums to end the current conflict. It has often done so with the coordination of the United Nations Security Council and the African Union, who withheld the release of a report on the origins of the war and atrocities committed by the government allegedly because the material within was considered detrimental to ongoing negotiations (Tanza & Zeitvogel, 2015). The “Troika” countries of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway have all made their offices available for negotiations, without lasting success.
The very personal relationships and animosities of elites on either side of the conflict may be partly responsible for its sudden eruption, and the difficulty of resolving it. The insular nature of the ruling party may have prevented various elements of South Sudanese civil society from providing an outlet for grievances that would have forestalled conflict. People who could have helped but were not of the party were consequently turned away. Johnson notes that the Archbishop of South Sudan had approached various elements of the regime in advance of the conflict to offer general support or mediation of political disagreements, but never got a sense in talking to various party members of the tenseness of the situation (Johnson, 2014). She suggests delegates from the African National Conference in South Africa might be better involved because, like the SPLA but with greater success, they’ve made the transition from a resistance organization to a governing political party. The ANC has retained an element of group discipline that has endured even during ideological differences and schisms within the party, and may therefore be able to empathize with the warring factions of the SPLM/A more immediately. There are reports IGAD has considered including South Africa more directly in the mediation process (Sudan Tribune, 2015, March 11).

Given these dynamics, there has been little of the coordination between state and civil society that aids in successful development efforts. Some recent NGO activity and bilateral partnerships have generated positive results, however, both before and during the current crisis. In 2012, USAID completed a road from Juba to the town of Nimule, on the border with Uganda (USAID, 2015). The project was notable not only because it is one of the only all-weather roads in the country, but also because it links South Sudan’s capital, in the heart of Equatoria, to an important neighboring economy. This allows both a market for Ugandan goods and access to these goods by many regions of South Sudan not on the front lines of the conflict. Needless to say, the government has also sought to seek a military advantage with this crucial artery. Kampala has been very involved in the conflict to date, supporting Juba adamantly and providing substantial military assistance. There has been interest in what kind of deals have been cut between presidents Kiir and Museveni, in part because it is not clear how Juba is paying for its protracted campaign.

In addition to providing basic infrastructure, NGOs and international organizations have been vital in attempts to alleviate the insecurity created by the current crisis, particularly in famine prevention efforts. The UN mission in South Sudan has also done commendable work in saving lives, especially at the beginning of the crisis. Various UN camps around South Sudan opened their gates up during the conflict’s December 2013 outbreak, allowing almost 120,000 displaced people to seek shelter there despite having any real notice (GlobalR2P, 2015). This operation began first in the two main camps in Juba and then throughout the rest of the country. The United Nations have not been able to resolve the conflict, but helping the ruling party resolve their internal issues has not been a mission the UN is tasked with to date. The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) operation has instead focused on protecting civilians and working to implement agreements to which the South Sudanese government is already a party. Despite its best efforts to prevent casualties among displaced people, the UN has also faced frustrating suspicion from both dominant factions in the conflict that it is secretly in league with the other side. Former Vice President Machar in particular has floated his suspicions of double standards on the UN’s part (eNCA, 2014).

There has been some movement on the part of the international community to resolve the conflict, though it has been halting and slow to gather momentum. On March 3, 2015, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2206, allowing for a framework by which sanctions can be imposed (UN, 2015). This resolution
would be notable if only because it has been so difficult for that body to come to agreement in the past on how to resolve Sudanese and South Sudanese conflict. In the past, China and Russia have used the threat of their permanent veto to good effect to block any efforts by United Nations Security Council (UNSC) members, the United States and United Kingdom in particular, to curb regional violence or condemn specific parties involved in it.

China’s willingness to sign on to a resolution calling for punishment of a key trading partner in Africa is the most notable demonstration that they are no longer backing South Sudan without reservation, patiently waiting for that government to resolve its business before allowing the oil industry to export at full capacity again. China has consistently worked with Khartoum and eventually Juba to access southern oil, but has lately been concerned that Juba has allowed the South Sudanese conflict to escalate needlessly. Beijing regards President Kiir and his cadre in government as having an inflexible streak with respect to power-sharing which they fear has exacerbated, if not caused, the current crisis. Consequently, the Chinese have been willing to explore with other UNSC members resolutions that might stop the war. This new approach for Beijing first became apparent with its announcement that it would suspend weapons sales to Juba in the summer of 2014. Significantly, China has also sent UN peacekeeping troops to the region as of this January, a battalion of 700 or 800 troops with more expected to follow later this year (Dumo, 2015).

While it is important that major states are seeking to coordinate their response to the conflict, no one should be overly optimistic about this kind of coercion and outside intervention ending conflict. Conflict in Southern Sudan’s past has led to regional instability even when insurgents forces are relatively small and poorly armed. In the early 1960s, the first insurgency against Khartoum made rural governance nearly impossible with little more than a few old rifles and traditional weapons such as spears. Juba must determine how it will address grievances in addition to making fighting harder for insurgents.

The US has also been forced to be more assertive, in part due to China’s change of course. With Beijing no longer a potential obstacle, Washington has looked for a constructive approach towards Juba. For a period there appeared to be two key factions forming within President Obama’s foreign policy circle, with Secretary of State John Kerry and UN ambassador Samantha Power on one side and National Security Adviser Susan Rice on the other. The first camp was interested in getting a viable sanctions regime in place if needed to stop the flow of arms into the country and punish targeted individuals in the South Sudanese government. Rice, on the other hand, appeared more interested in building South Sudan’s state capacity, arguing that if the international community were to punish the government at that moment it might contribute to future problems (Lynch, 2015). South Sudan, after all, is already one of the weakest governments in Africa, a continent with no shortage of them. This in a sense is a microcosm of a debate the international community was having over the war: How best to end the conflict and also build up state capacity?

Conclusion

This short review of the situation in South Sudan has given some idea of the development problems the state continues to face, the nature of the role economic and developmental concerns have played in the conflict, and the roles specific development-minded NGOs and state actors have played in attempts to resolve conflict. To date, power-sharing considerations have taken priority over development measures in negotiations regarding the end of hostilities. States, NGOs, and regional and international organizations have sought to harmonize their approaches to mediation but face the same challenges coordinating their approach to conflict resolution with
civil society as they have coordinating their approach to development. This may have contributed to the confusion regarding these respective challenges for the new country.

When the conflict ends, South Sudan will likely return to an even less promising future than it had at independence and will have to work even harder to make sure it has even basic state cohesion, never mind ambitious plans for economic development. As neighboring countries such as Ethiopia and Uganda put aside years of internal warfare in favor of bold development initiatives unachievable during the fighting, South Sudanese elites should look to their example and put development first. Unfortunately, it may take years for the young country to resolve the power struggles among its political leadership that have posed such a threat not just to its consistent economic progress, but to its very coherence as a state.

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