A Year of Change in South Sudan

Local and national transformations in peace, conflict and humanitarian need in South Sudan
Tuesday, 30th March 2021

SUMMARY DOCUMENT

ABOUT US

'A YEAR OF CHANGE'

On the 30th of March, the Network for Innovative Resilience-Building in South Sudan hosted a learning event, organised against the backdrop of profound transformations in the political, economic and humanitarian context in South Sudan over the past 12 months. The event brought together South Sudanese, regional and Irish researchers, humanitarian response and peacebuilding practitioners, and policymakers.

It aimed to support a better understanding of recent changes in national and sub-national peace and conflict in the country; the impact of these for vulnerable populations; and the implications for reducing humanitarian needs across humanitarian, policy and research actors.

The learning event sought to address the following questions

- What are the most significant changes in the political, economic and humanitarian context in South Sudan over the past year?
- What are the most significant impacts of these changes for vulnerable individuals and communities affected?
- What new challenges have these changes presented for reducing humanitarian need and building resilience?
- What are the gaps in our evidence, knowledge and learning in this context?

The event was held under Chatham House Rules, but this summary document synthesises key issues identified by participants in relation to the most significant changes, most significant impacts on the vulnerable, new challenges to reducing need, and remaining gaps in evidence, knowledge and learning.

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a space for dialogue between development researchers
policy-makers and practitioners

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> "Participants cited examples of areas currently seeing returns, where the most basic services and infrastructure are lacking. If communities return to find needs are not met, they may return to their displacement site, move on to a further location, or influence the decisions of others to return, all of which have implications for protection, integration and livelihoods."

MOST SIGNIFICANT CHANGES

Among the most significant changes to take place in South Sudan in the past year, participants highlighted the change in **the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) mandate**. Where the mission had previously been responsible for protection of civilian (PoC) sites, these had now been transformed into IDP camps with local government taking responsibility for security and protection. This has not generated the difficulties some had expected with feared large-scale outbreaks of violence in Unity State largely absent. This can be attributed to the prospects for peace in a country where the population did not want a return to war. Yet, signs of further fragmentation among political elites mean the possibility for conflict in the near future remained very real. With high levels of turnover in political leadership at the local level recently, participants reported that this could present a challenge for coordination with new officials.

Early indications of **the return of displaced populations** were another significant change discussed during the learning event. Against the backdrop of the formation of the national unity government and the re-establishment of local government at different levels, participants noted small numbers of returns to date. UNHCR estimates that over 120,000 refugees returned to South Sudan in 2020, while almost 2.2million remain displaced. On return, however, people are finding limited services and supports. Participants cited examples of areas currently seeing returns, where the most basic services and infrastructure are lacking. If communities return to find needs are not met, they may return to their displacement site, move on to a further location, and influence the decisions of others to return, all of which have implications for the displaced and recently returned populations' protection, integration and livelihoods.

Finally, **the impact of climate change on livelihoods and food security** was highlighted as a continuing source of uncertainty and transformation in the country. Humanitarian actors reported challenges, for example, in accurately advising communities of when, how and what to plant, for example. Due to climate change, seasonal patterns are increasingly uncertain, and exacerbated by insecurity.

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MOST SIGNIFICANT IMPACTS ON THE VULNERABLE

Participants highlighted three key areas in which these changes have had significant impacts on the vulnerable. First, **continued economic deterioration and its impact on food security was discussed**. In March, the South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan for 2021 was launched, requesting USD1.7bn to reach almost 7 million people in need of urgent life-saving assistance. The impact of these conditions was particularly highlighted in relation to the gap between the official and parallel exchange rate, having a huge impact on buying power. The example was given of the reduced value of cash transfers and vouchers when compared to the actual cost of the food basket, whereby a recent food voucher with a value of USD 40 in real terms translated to USD 11. At the same time, major food security actors are reporting insufficient funds and reducing food rations as a result.

A second impact discussed was on **returnees following displacement**. On the one hand, participants discussed the reluctance among many displaced populations to return, in part because of the draw of services and supports in areas hosting large numbers of displaced people. This raises questions of sustainable urbanisation, and how formerly displaced people might be economically and social integrated in urban centres. For example, what peacebuilding and integration initiatives exist in urban areas to support growing urban populations? Another challenge, both disincentivising return and raising significant issues for populations upon return, is the question of property rights. The biggest challenge identified by participants to re-integration in areas of origin is property, as populations who have been displaced may find their property and land has been occupied in their absence, or their right to their property is in dispute. Presently, there is no robust mechanism for conflict resolution for property rights to facilitate more civic engagement and how returnees integrate with back into their previous communities.

Third, the specific impacts of recent **economic, political and social changes for youth** were discussed. Participants discussed how many young people have high expectations, but very little hope. Equally, they are often excluded from humanitarian and development programming: in emergency contexts, prioritisation, for example, is given in many programmes to children under 5 and other specific vulnerable groups, but in between are youth who are often disenfranchised. The particular example was given of youth in internal displacement settings: children who entered camps at the age of 10 or 12 are now young adults and looking for livelihood opportunities. Participants asked: how do we meet that need and respond to it?

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NEW CHALLENGES FOR REDUCING NEED

Beyond their direct impact on the humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable, the profound changes detailed above have also created new challenges for humanitarian response.

Chief among these, is **movement restrictions that have arisen as a result of COVID-19**. The mobility of humanitarian actors has been severely restricted, which in turn has had an impact on programme delivery. While varying access to populations has long been noted as an obstacle to addressing humanitarian needs in South Sudan, the scale of restrictions as a result of COVID-19, and their implications for accountability of humanitarian actors to affected populations in particular, are relatively novel. Participants discussed how accountability to affected populations was impacted by the impacts of mobility restrictions on the design, implementation and monitoring of programmes. As one example, normally, programmes would be designed through a combination of participatory needs assessments with affected population to inform the prioritisation of needs, but the global health crisis has severely restricted humanitarians' ability to consult communities across the country.

Alongside this more immediate obstacle, are wider changes taking place in the humanitarian system across the country. Against the backdrop of donors and UN agencies reducing funding, recent changes have presented **new obstacles to humanitarian localisation in South Sudan**. Participants noted that while the humanitarian community speaks the 'language' of localisation, the ambition of the localisation agenda is a long way from being realised in South Sudan. Bureaucratic and administrative systems were identified as key barriers to funding and opportunities reaching local humanitarian organisations and researchers. Moreover, both donors and international humanitarian actors can struggle identifying local CSOs with which to engage, and understanding potential politicisation of local civil society.

Third, the challenge of planning for not only i**mmediate needs, but medium- and longer-term time horizons** was highlighted. Participants reflected on the challenges of doing this when the situation is so volatile and unpredictable. The urgency of responding to humanitarian needs was also raised as an obstacle to longer-term planning, as it limits the resources available to dedicate to longer-term development approaches. The current global health crisis, and the many impacts it has on mobility and response, was identified as a particular barrier to nimble and agile response, at precisely the same time the rapidly evolving situation demands more adaptive approaches.

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> Participants in the event highlighted that the long-term impact of local-level peace-building remains poorly understood, as many evaluations and studies continue to focus on outcomes within the life cycle of projects.

GAPS IN EVIDENCE, KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING

Participants highlighted the particular difficulty of **accessing credible information** about the situation in South Sudan in the context of COVID-19 in particular, when access to the country, and/or programming areas outside of Juba is limited. When the information is available it is filtered from different lenses and perspectives. This can contribute to a disconnect between the political analysis reported and populations themselves, raising the following questions: How can that gap between the political level and the civil society level be bridged? How can members of the international community formulate good policy when they are so dependent on relatively limited information from particular sources? And how can international NGOs working with local partners help to improve engagement between policymakers and local civil society?

Key gaps in relation to **conflict dynamics and peacebuilding** highlighted in the presentations and discussion included the differential impacts of conflict shocks – how different types of conflict, affect different individuals, households and communities differently. Spikes and triggers of conflict were also raised as areas for further study with clear operational impact: what are the early warning signs of triggers and spikes in conflict, and what can be done to prevent those from spilling over into active conflict? Drawing on positive reflections during the event, the absence or de-escalation of violence were highlighted as important learning opportunities – where (and why) conflict has not broken out, and what can we learn from this? Reviewing the evidence of peacebuilding, participants highlighted how the long-term impact of local-level peacebuilding remains poorly understood, as many evaluations and studies continue to focus on outcomes within the life cycle of projects.

FURTHR READING

Concern Worldwide (2018) *Knowledge Matters – Improving Resilience in South Sudan*.

Concern Worldwide (2020) *Coping with Covid-19: The Impact on the Extreme Poo*r.

Dowd, Caitriona (2018) *Conflict and Hunger: The Lived Experience of Conflict and Food Insecurity in South Sudan*, Concern Worldwide.

Humanitarian Action Study Group (2020) *Humanitarian Localisation in Conflict Contexts: Summary Documen*t, DSA Ireland.

Kolok, Jame David, Mahdi, Maram and Allan Ngari (2021) *Land and Reparative Justice in South Sudan*, ISS Africa.

Kumalo, Liezelle and Cassie Roddy-Mullineaux (2019) *Sustaining Peace: Harnessing the Power of South Sudanese Women*, ISS Africa.

GAPS IN EVIDENCE, KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING (CONT'D)

Food systems and food security were a second area highlighted as a gap in existing knowledge. Reflecting on the extraordinarily high levels of food insecurity in the country at present, participants asked: do we understand food systems sufficiently, both how they work and how they have transformed as a result of the global health crisis? The question was linked to wider processes of climate change, with participants emphasising that what might have been known in the past may no longer hold, and the absence of essential, basic information such as meteorological data and other key statistics limits understanding further.

Third, the area of **land issues** was highlighted. With the potential for large-scale returns, and movement to urban areas, if land disputes are not resolved by transitional justice programmes, they could trigger more violence in South Sudan. Durable solutions as an approach have the potential to be extremely practical and effective if given enough time and funding, but when efforts are led by government, a key gap in our understanding is the implications this will have for the social contract between populations and other stakeholders, including fother armed groups, or customary authorities?

ABOUT THE NETWORK

The Network for Innovative Resilience-Building in South Sudan includes members from ISS Africa, Dublin City University and Concern Worldwide. It is supported by a New Foundations grant from the Irish Research Council and the Department of Foreign Affairs.

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