GLOBAL INSIGHT
a focus on current issues
INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL DIALOGUE
Issue 64 / August 2006

‘From below zero to zero’: development in post-war Southern Sudan

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Despite being viewed by some observers as nothing more than an exclusive agreement between two dominant military protagonists in the Sudanese political crisis, there is no doubt that the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) (signed between the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement [SPLM] and president El Bashir’s government in January 2005) marked a very significant step towards the establishment of sustainable peace in the war-torn country. The CPA’s significance mainly lies in its provisions on power- and wealth-sharing. Firstly, the power-sharing agreement provides for a largely autonomous government for Southern Sudan, as well as a share for Southern Sudan in the government of national unity (GNU). The two main players in Sudan, president El Bashir’s government and the SPLM, maintain that this power-sharing arrangement opens space for making unity ‘attractive,’ while giving the Southern Sudanese population the option of a vote in six years to decide on whether to remain unified with the north or become independent. Secondly, the wealth-sharing agreement in the CPA provides a reasonable framework for resource allocation and sustainable decentralisation, and establishes comparative underdevelopment and war-affected status as key criteria, or formulae, for revenue allocation. Thus, while giving the south a share of total national revenue, the agreement also grants the government of Southern Sudan (GOSS) the right to collect additional domestic revenue, mobilise external support, and set up its own banking system, albeit within the framework of the Central Bank of Sudan. Over and above these two important elements, the CPA also contains a security protocol which outlines a collaborative approach to security, by providing for two armed forces and joint integrated units that will form the nucleus of a future national army.

Challenges of identity and development

While the CPA contains several fundamental gains for the SPLM, post-war Southern Sudan is bound to have an unenviable double identity. Firstly, if unity proves ‘unattractive’ beyond the prescribed six-year transitional period, Southern Sudan will become Africa’s newest country, and its 54th member. Secondly, if Southern Sudan moves towards full statehood between now and 2011, it will have to map out its own development strategy from scratch. Ultimately, as a latecomer to independence and development, Southern Sudan will be faced with a daunting and almost insurmountable ‘construction,’ rather than ‘reconstruction,’ challenge. Yet, Southern Sudan could become a shrewd and rational player, and turn its situation into a comparative advantage by drawing object lessons from Africa’s numerous mistakes. This policy brief, therefore, examines some of the development challenges facing the GOSS, either

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in the event of seceding to become a completely autonomous region, or not. By sifting through some of the priority development areas, the brief also attempts to weigh the opportunities and threats to Southern Sudan's future political and economic growth prospects. More importantly, it concludes by proposing an alternative development strategy for Southern Sudan, albeit in the context of contemporary globalisation.

Resolving the 'national question': lessons from Southern Africa

One of the often mentioned weaknesses of the SPLM is that it remains a military outfit struggling to reinvent itself as a credible civilian political organisation. This is because its military wing, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), still suffers from its trappings as a guerrilla movement. However, many observers feel that the military ethos underpinning the SPLM's civil administration has been a source of past and present internal ethnic divisions, particularly between the non-Dinka ethnic groups such as the Nuer on the one hand, and the Dinka, who still dominate the SPLM's leadership, on the other. In the absence of a common experience of repression by, and resistance to, the government in Khartoum, the south will remain, by and large, a bitterly contested political space with no unified Southern Sudanese identity. Thus, the only viable basis for forging a Southern Sudanese identity will be the establishment of an effective, democratic, participatory, and accountable civil authority that will empower both civil society and marginalised ethnic groups in the south.

Like other countries such as Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, and Zimbabwe, Southern Sudan is a region 'born of war' and a result of a protracted, militant and largely socialist-oriented armed struggle. This struggle was based on key grievances centred on what scholars have called the 'national question.' In order to build a viable foundation for peace and development, post-war Southern Sudan also has to address certain fundamental questions. If a single Southern Sudanese identity necessary for internal political cohesion is to prevail, the following uncomfortable questions have to be asked: do the people of Southern Sudan consider themselves a nation? Given the multiple religious and ethnic identities that have been exacerbated by the influx of southerners from the north, what will be the national identity of Southern Sudan? The answer to these questions will be important in deciding whether the majority of people will want to remain as part of greater Sudan, or break away entirely to join an independent Southern Sudan at the end of the transitional period in 2011. If unity proves unattractive, will secession of the south ultimately fulfil the objectives of the armed struggle which the SPLM waged so bitterly over two decades? How will the historical questions associated with unequal distribution of wealth, development, religious, and racial discrimination be resolved? How will the thousands of armed militias that roam the south be disarmed, and what role will reconciliation play?

These hard questions can be answered broadly by an internal dialogue of the southerners themselves. However, high expectations and the massive influx of southerners from the north make it necessary to speed up the process of internal dialogue, as a precursor to a viable post-war political and economic arrangement. Yet haste may lead to waste. For a start, Southern Sudan has to learn from Southern Africa about the dangers of importing tried and failed 'models of reconciliation without social justice', including the pitfalls of uncritically adopting wholesale neo-liberal strategies of economic development. One clear lesson from the Southern African region is that reconciliation should not be driven by political expediency. As this latter case also shows, while reconciliation could promote the GOSS's international approval ratings in the short-term, it could also stand in the way of popular demands for social justice, and political and economic transformation, over the longer term. Thus, in this sense, reconciliation could become untenable, especially against the background of popular demands for the resolution of outstanding national questions over land redistribution and allocation of scarce economic resources in general.

There are other dangers lurking, as well. For example, Southern Sudan, as a country, finds itself at a very slippery point in multilateral politics. In this context, the refusal by the Sudanese government to accept UN peace-keeping operations in Darfur, while the GOSS has accepted the world body's role out of necessity, may actually weaken the GNU in the short term. There is a real possibility that the GOSS may be unwittingly drawn into the long-running conflict between president Bashir's government and the United States, which seems intent on piling pressure on Sudan in order to force it into accepting UN troops in Darfur. Under these circumstances, were the United States to float a deal such as: 'development for you (southerners, in exchange for co-operating with the United States) and sanctions for "them" (that is, the Bashir government, for refusing to do the same),' the GOSS might easily be tempted to accept the offer. However, taking the deal would be suicidal, as the north would most likely retaliate by destabilising the south, or simply violate the provisions of the CPA, whose successful implementation the southerners desperately need. If this happens, the south would most likely descend into civil war, thereby turning back Sudan's political clock by 20 years, if not more.

Infrastructure development

After 20 years of war, physical infrastructure is virtually non-existent in Southern Sudan. With a total land area to govern approximately equal to that of Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and

Burundi combined (870 000 km^2), the GOSS is faced with the mammoth task of developing an efficient road, rail, and air transport system from scratch. Even worse, cities, which include Juba and, particularly, the proposed site of the new capital, Rumbek, will have to be built up from the ground. Although reports suggest that the construction of government offices has already begun, especially in Juba, more needs to be done to set up the infrastructure needed for a developing economy. The fact that Rumbek already serves as headquarters of the UN and its various aid agencies should provide a useful start, and a link with external development agencies. However, as business opportunities grow in Rumbek and Juba, the need for accommodation, hotel facilities, offices, and improved communication systems will also increase exponentially. In the short term, all-weather unsurfaced roads should suffice to link up all emerging economic centres in the country. The old colonial tendency of building roads and rail links that have less to do with supporting internal trade than facilitating the export of raw materials should be avoided. Similarly, the air transport system, which has remained operational even under difficult circumstances, will also need to be improved and managed efficiently to allow faster movement of people, goods, and services into the interior.

The other inescapable reality on the ground is that Southern Sudan's fledgling infrastructure depends heavily on the activities of donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In the past three decades, all existing government infrastructure has withered away or completely decayed. By the time the CPA was signed, the space left by withered state institutions had been filled by a host of non-state actors, such as NGOs, UN agencies, aid workers, and adventurous consultants. In fact, during the war, civil society or non-state actors became the de facto government, responsible for providing social services in those areas controlled by the SPLM/A. Currently, NGOs are the main source of employment for southerners in general. Although the role of non-state actors in governance is now recognised internationally, the GOSS needs to reclaim its authority quickly, in order to avoid the dangers of unwittingly creating a polymorphous state weakened by severe policy fragmentation.

Granted, the new government's challenges are compounded by competition from international aid agencies which can afford to pay higher salaries, and therefore are able to attract skilled manpower. But the challenge is for the government to establish institutions quickly, and find ways of tapping into the Sudanese diaspora for skilled manpower. Although there are no recorded statistics, it is clear that there are thousands of highly educated southerners on the continent who could help with the creation of new political and economic institutions. In this regard, the first step would be to undertake an inventory of skills inside the country and abroad. Parallel to this, is the need to assess key programmes around which a new and viable economy can be constructed. Such an approach would help create the basis for a comprehensive strategy for human resource development and utilisation in the Southern Sudan.

'The river between': management of the Nile water

As with other countries in that region, the river Nile runs through Southern Sudan like a giant network of veins that breathes life into one of the world's longest, and probably most volatile, fertile basins. Thus, there is potential for this river to be harnessed for transport, water, irrigation, and hydro-electric power generation. Yet the river is as much a potential political powder-keg as it is an economic asset. For example, Southern Sudan's economic rights are precluded by the antiquated Nile water agreement of 1929 (and its subsequent amendments in 1959), which legalised Egypt's sweeping rights over water usage along the Nile river's upper reaches. Such inherited arrangements will no doubt affect the GOSS's ability to use the Nile water for irrigation and for hydro-electric purposes. For the GOSS to secure its own rights, the treaty of 1929 will have to be renegotiated, perhaps with the help of the UN and the African Union (AU). Although some parts of the river's upper reaches are known to be unnavigable, the possibility of using the Jonglei canal as a transport route needs to be further explored as one way of opening up the interior.

Evading the 'resource curse'

Under the CPA, South Sudan is entitled to 50 per cent of all oil revenues in Sudan. Oil politics will no doubt be one of the greatest tests of the conflicting parties' commitment to the CPA. One of the challenges will be for the GOSS to avoid the proverbial 'oil curse'. As an emerging oil producer, Southern Sudan should examine the experience of similar countries and regions that have entered into concession contracts with big multinationals and international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Numerous studies show that where oil extraction is concerned, the contractual instruments entered into tend to be predatory

and dishonest, or, alternatively, are a licence for outright looting. The need for transparency will be critical, while dependence on oil, as current budget estimates suggest, has to be avoided by diversifying the economy and government sources of revenue. For example, the longer the GOSS takes to constitute the commissions mandated by the CPA, the more likely that key decisions governing the exploitation of minerals run the risk of becoming 'informalised', and hence less transparent. Thus, evading the 'resource curse' will involve building an economy based on the production of finished products and services, rather than the sale of natural resources to greedy speculators and global economic swindlers.

Making a case for Africa's 'original' developmental state?

For students of African political economy, the political settlement in Sudan could not have come at a better time. For instance, few, if any, will miss the fact that the signing of the CPA came at a time characterised by mounting concerns over the negative developmental consequences of neo-liberal economic policies in general. Such concerns have not only provided much needed space for a reassessment of the role of the state in economic development, but have also led to growing calls among poor countries for the establishment of 'effective' developmental states, as antidotes for the shortcomings of market-led economic growth strategies that brought untold suffering and misery to the African continent in the 1980s and late 1990s. In this context, the GOSS cannot pretend that there is no alternative to neo-liberal economic strategies. Although the concept of a developmental state remains highly contested, most scholars agree that the ideal or typical developmental state consists, at least in part, of two key characteristics:

- the existence of a political and policy elite motivated by nationalist sentiments, which is committed to economic growth and transformation, with power, authority, and legitimacy to promote a developmental agenda; and
- the existence of a competent, authoritative state administration, particularly in the economic sphere, with the technical and managerial capacity to guide and steer economic and social development.

It is also generally agreed that in a developmental state, both the political and policy elite and state institutions should not only complement each other, but also exist in relative autonomy from particular vested interests, thereby allowing them to:

- stand above the demands of specific social groups, whether defined by class, ethnicity or religion; and
- shape policy for a broader, national interest.

In the face of the cold realities of globalisation, therefore, the post-Garang ruling elite in the GOSS would be better advised to temper its perceived narrow, selfish political interests with the establishment of a highly competent, legitimate, and authoritative national state capable of driving a broad-based national development agenda in Southern Sudan. With no real economic 'base' and external economic relations worth talking about, a massive internal campaign will be needed to mobilise the support of all southerners – including those in the diaspora – firmly behind the GOSS's economic vision. Predictably, and just as in all other post-colonial African states, the GOSS will be confronted by a familiar yet untenable dilemma: the exigencies of a highly skewed international trading system, on the one hand; and the high expectations or demands of millions of poor and displaced southerners, on the other. Thus, in the context of the unrelenting forces of globalisation, Southern Sudan, alongside other developing countries, will have to build stronger and autonomous states capable of protecting their already shrinking policy space. Also, as the GOSS opens its doors to investors and contractors, it should proceed cautiously to protect the long-term interests of its citizens, and avoid the economic pitfalls of uncritically embracing neo-liberal development strategies that regard the state as an obstacle rather than a facilitator of development.

Conclusion

The main strategic policy objectives of the GOSS should be to:

- reverse the history of institutionalised underdevelopment;
- repair the damage caused by more than two decades of civil war; and
- establish a politically stable and economically viable developmental state.

With no external debt to talk about, and with no rigidly structured or 'socially engineered' colonial-type model of development to inherit, Southern Sudan will be more or less

free to learn from 50 years of Africa's post-independent economic experience. Therefore, an opportunity exists to explore new thinking on development strategies that have worked elsewhere, such as those adopted by the 'Asian tigers'. In this regard, the new government should play a central role in establishing a home-grown developmental agenda, by defining its own rules of engagement with all external partners, which include donor countries and other new international economic players, such as China. More importantly, the GOSS should declare the moral equivalent of a liberation war against Southern Sudan's state of underdevelopment, religious prejudice, intolerance, and racism, without fears of violating old economic dogma. In any case, the 'tigers' of South East Asia have long shown that fostering a climate for internal trade and co-operation, self-reliance, realistic expectations, and home-grown strategies can lead to economic success much faster than foreign aid and failed Washington Consensus schemes.

Policy recommendations

Government of South Sudan: Despite the numerous challenges facing it, the GOSS can offer Africa some new lessons in economic development strategies, provided the idea of establishing a developmental state is taken seriously. While the international donor community is likely to shift its attention to Southern Sudan, and rightly so, the lure of easy donor money should not be allowed to create dependency, or stifle the adoption of a home-grown development agenda.

Central government (Khartoum): As the other signatory of the CPA, president El Bashir's government should fully commit itself to the implementation of the CPA or the Machakos protocol without delay. Further brinkmanship will only render the goal of making unity attractive to the southerners elusive, and may also herald the beginning of the end of a unified Sudan.

The African Union: The AU should make sure that the period of transition is not used to rearrange the domestic political and economic environment to the exclusive advantage or disadvantage of either party to the CPA. Thus, if the current peace dividend leads to foreign investment and further oil exploration and exploitation in Sudan, the AU should see to it that such a potentially positive outcome is not used to entrench patronage, and bolster internal security networks that will undermine the peace process.

The United Nations: Given its comparative advantage in the area of human development, the UN should help the GOSS to build viable state institutions or systems of governance in the south. Where relevant, lessons on UN trusteeship in East Timor should be applied.

Other actors (Uganda, Egypt, and China): The international community should not ignore the importance of foreign countries such as China, Egypt, and Uganda in Sudanese politics. These external political and economic players' collective interests and influence should be harnessed to sustain peace, and promote reconciliation and development in Southern Sudan.

Selected readings

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ISSN 1607 2375
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