

# Welcome to the NGO World of the South Sudan: Reflections

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To a person who has travelled in any part of war-torn South Sudan these days, it will come as no surprise that the peace talks in Naivasha are on the mind of every South Sudanese, whether ordinary or sophisticated. During the last two weeks of January 2004, I travelled through Central Equatoria and Lakes. I passed through Yei, Maridi, Yambio, and Mundri and wound up in Rumbek. It is no exaggeration to say that even those among the displaced and homeless of the liberated towns and villages of South Sudan who had become deranged owing to the war or who had sunk into apathy felt concerned, and enquired whether peace was at hand.

The towns and villages we passed through had been liberated by the gallant SPLA forces of Central Equatoria, Lakes and parts of Bahr el Ghazal in 1997, since when there has been no active fighting there, except for the wanton and intermittent aerial bombardment by the Government aircraft that used to characterize South Sudan until a few months ago. Western Equatoria, of course, was liberated as early as 1990 and its people have since been living in freedom and relative peace. Unfortunately, this has not translated into social and economic recovery.

I was part of an exploratory trip undertaken by SNV, a Dutch NGO operating in East and the Horn of Africa. The objectives of the trip apart, I had a reason of my own for taking the long overland journey from Kaya to Rumbek. As a student of society and a social and development activist I wanted to gauge for myself the people's expectations and the socioeconomic changes that had taken place since my last trip, in 1999. In that year I had made a similar journey as part of a CRS team engaged in a background study for USAID's Sudan Transitional Aid for Rehabilitation (STAR) programme, which was then about to be implemented in the ten counties of Central, Western Equatoria and Lakes.

The international humanitarian intervention spearheaded by the UN/OLS on behalf of the victims of war remains to date a double-edged sword. Its impact on the people of South Sudan will last for a very long time to come. On reflection, my trip made it absolutely clear that everything of interest and value in South Sudan is still driven by relief and development aid institutions. A few individuals have managed to log themselves into the comforts of war and aid-driven economy, while the majority wallow in abject poverty and neglect. Thus in

Yei, Yambio, Maridi, Mundri, Yeri and Rumbek, Ugandan and Kenyan consumer goods (beers, salt, cigarettes, and so on) are ubiquitous. Ironically, this has become a means of siphoning back to East Africa what little cash comes in as remuneration for the staff of the humanitarian agencies or that accrues from the provision of services and the exchange of local produce.

South Sudan is experiencing a second tragedy – economic exploitation along with the deprivation of the many. The trip has alerted me to an important fact that we have ignored since the outbreak of the war: that nobody offers you anything for nothing. The US is the biggest provider of relief aid to South Sudan and we are left with a feeling of gratitude.

The US ships in thousands of tons of maize and soya bean cooking oil. Maize and soya grow well in Equatoria, and Western Equatoria has been producing surplus crops which lie rotting in its stores in Yambio, Nzara, Tambura and Maridi. Did it ever occur to the providers of food relief that it would cost less to buy maize, cooking oil and other consumable goods from the farmers in Western Equatoria and Lakes than from the USA or Europe? The answer is yes, but of course importing from the US works to strengthen the US economy so that it can provide us with food relief. This could be the height of cynicism. In this I clearly saw the hollowness of the process we call liberation, for which the South Sudanese have sacrificed two and half million lives in less than two decades. What does “liberation” really mean if in the end relief dependency syndrome dominates the thinking of the people who have not seen members of the ruling class for a long time? What does it mean if chasing the Northern Sudanese and their soldiers from the towns and villages has not translated into economic freedom for our farmers and cattle herders?

I had the shock of my life while in Rumbek. South Sudan is like a free port where all currencies and commodities, except the Sudanese dinar, circulate freely. However, in APEX camp, which serves the high-class UN agency and NGO staff, we had the rude shock of being told that we could not pay for Bell beer in Ugandan shillings, although the beer is produced in Uganda. The new economic masters of South Sudan operate as if there is no local authority and they act in a way that is insensitive to the people. They claim that this is because they are being heavily taxed, but this is unconvincing, to say the least. My real fear is that nobody seems to care. Everybody, including those in positions of authority, is complaining about everything, yet nothing is happening in terms of reforms.

The level of corruption has surpassed the pre-war levels and affects all sectors, including the humanitarian agencies, as the competition for power and accumulated wealth shifts into high gear. There is not the slightest hope of reform in the near future partly because of the muted political environment occasioned by the long-running war and the militarization that accompanied it; and partly due to the fact that the forces for change and democratic transformation are fledgling and weak. The situation as it exists, and which perhaps will deteriorate with the coming of peace, will be the unmaking of the New Sudan. There is no uniformity in the manner in which things are managed. It depends on the individual in a position of authority and how exposed he or she is to modernity.

Wherever we went, the hunger for information and news, particularly news about the peace negotiations, was evident. People constantly asked questions, but it was not easy to volunteer to play the role of an SPLM information officer, especially as I myself was relying

on third- and fourth-hand information, proximity to Naivasha notwithstanding. The *Sudan Mirror* is perhaps the only print medium that features South Sudan. It arrives very late, of course, and given the level of illiteracy it only serves a small minority. The need for information sharing, whether through print, electronic or audio means, cannot be over-emphasized. The Sudan Radio Service provided by the Office of Transitional Initiative (OTI) airs its programmes in Arabic, English and six local languages. Radio Voice of Hope also provides programming tailored to peace issues and the promotion of South Sudanese values.

The social and political engineering of South Sudan's transition to peace has many faults, which require immediate attention and rectification to avoid entrenchment of the very factors that precipitated the war and the ethnic conflicts. Peace with the North can only be consolidated by peace and harmony within the south. It will come about only when instruments and institutions of good governance are put in place, which must be done immediately. This must be followed by the establishment of principled and accountable vertical and horizontal relationships between individuals and institutions, whether state, public or private. This alone will ensure and consolidate the peace the people of South Sudan are yearning for.

#### Notes

1. This article first appeared in the *Sudan Mirror*, 1–14 March 2004.