

# **Challenges to peacebuilding in Sudan: the role of the international community**

**Gunnar M. Sørbo**

The comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) represents a major opportunity for positive change and sustainable peace in Sudan. But the potential for harm is also great. Outbreaks of war and massive violence have followed the failure of peace agreements in several African countries, with high death tolls, enormous human suffering and great destruction.

All countries are unique and policy prescriptions based on a "one-size-fits-all" type can be quite misleading. Nevertheless, there are a number of general lessons from peace implementation elsewhere that apply also to Sudan. Thus we know that the two most important sources of failure are (a) the presence of groups, factions or leaders ("spoilers") who feel their own grievances have not been sufficiently addressed by the peace agreement, and (b) lack of sustained and coordinated international engagement.

In addition, we know that the presence of easily marketable and valuable primary products (like timber, oil or gems) often create particular problems when trying to build peace. The role of neighbouring states is always important. Building security is also critical, particularly in countries where there are armed groups that have not been parties to the peace process. Of course the danger of failure is greatest if several factors combine to undermine the promise of a fresh start that the signing of a peace agreement holds.

Based on lessons learnt from other situations, it is easy to agree that Sudan represents a difficult environment for peacebuilding. After all, civil war has been fought there for most of the post-independence period with only a brief spell of peace (1972-1983). There are multiple conflicts in the country, including an ongoing crisis in Darfur which has threatened to overshadow preparations for the implementation of the CPA. Most of the conflicts are interrelated in complex ways and some of them are located along or across the borders of other countries (Chad, Eritrea, Uganda). There are also potential tensions arising from the CPA, simultaneously building institutions to preserve the unity of Sudan while creating an autonomous southern entity that may eventually secede.

A major challenge will be to make peace as inclusive as possible and transform the CPA into a deal that can be "owned" not only by the parties that signed the agreement, but also by those who did not take part in the talks, including civil society and the Sudanese population at large. As part of such efforts, it will be important to address issues of democracy and decentralisation in new and creative ways. There is also a need to reverse a trend whereby local developments in many parts of the country have become increasingly conflictual and led to serious outbreaks of violence and human suffering (e.g. Darfur). These are massive tasks with no quick-fix solutions.

If internal and external factors do not fully converge in favour of lasting peace, there may still be a settlement. In such cases, sustained third party involvement is critically important, particularly in internal wars that end with a negotiated compromise rather than total victory and capitulation. Statistically, these wars are more likely to restart as one or the other party seeks to undo the compromise in their own favour. Various forms of attention are needed. Third parties must try to anticipate future problems that the peace agreement did not address

and which may undermine implementation. Monitoring events and providing reliable channels of information can help build confidence, reduce uncertainty, improve communication and defuse alleged violations. Attention at all three political levels – internal, regional, and the wider international system – is essential.

In Sudan, sustained and focused international attention has been critical to facilitate the peace agreement and will continue to be critical to maintain the momentum of the peace process. Conflict is embedded in the post-war situation and addressing unresolved political issues like Darfur will be essential to improve both security and conditions for economic recovery. There will be a need to keep the country on course in response to events on the ground and the non-predictable character of these transitions. Only a sustained, long-term engagement from the international community will help secure a lasting peace in Sudan.

Successful international involvement will depend on a number of factors.

First, *donors must honour the pledges they have made to support the Sudan peace process.* Although the Oslo donor conference in April 2005 generated very large pledges of financial support (USD 4.5bn), such gatherings have a long track record of disbursing smaller sums than promised, over a far longer time period than recipients initially hoped. There is a risk that this could occur on this occasion, not least because donors have made clear their discomfort at releasing funds while violence persists in Darfur. Already, there have been problems in securing funds for humanitarian needs in southern Sudan. The rudimentary capabilities of the government in the south will also make it difficult to meet donor requirements on the transparent and effective use of funds. At best, these factors look likely to result in a slow take-off for the new post-war era – a dangerous situation given the far-reaching political challenges to be faced and the high expectations that the government and the SPLM have built up since the CPA was signed.

Second, *international assistance must be sufficiently coordinated.* When international actors and/or local implementers lack unity, spoilers can take advantage to attack the peace process. However, coordination is often complicated by the fact that several large agencies typically are involved in various aspects as well as by the presence of different actors in the UN system and numerous NGOs financed bilaterally through donors. In Afghanistan, donors and aid agencies acknowledged the importance of having a distinct coordination structure that initially was anchored in the office of the deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG). Without budgetary and staffing power over the agencies, however, the SRSG had little capacity to integrate the mission, and the international financial institutions were at any rate outside his formal authority. As a result, coordination followed the usual voluntary form. In an innovative move, the formal responsibility for coordination was subsequently taken over by the Afghan authorities.

Strategic coordination – as distinct from tactical coordination of programs – entails the streamlining of policy interests of the external actors. In the governance field, a growing consensus among the major actors on what constitutes principles of good governance has lessened the challenge of strategic coordination. Divisions nevertheless remain. In Rwanda, donors were deeply divided over how far it could morally pressure the post-genocide government on any governance issue; in Afghanistan, donors are divided on how far to promote human rights and democracy if it endangers stability; and in the Balkans, Cambodia and Afghanistan, important external actors have diverging interests and priorities. The ‘war on terror’ has further divided US and European actors on matters of when and how to

introduce governance measures in the only two post-9/11 cases so far, i.e. Afghanistan and Iraq. There have also been serious divisions on how to deal with the crisis in Darfur among members of the UN Security Council.

The UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) led by an SRSG (Jan Pronk) is expected to play a key role in peace implementation. The model for Sudan has been referred to as being at the “cutting edge”, but there are questions regarding the possible limitations of a unified mission approach under the current UN system structure. Still, a coordinated approach will be crucial and if UNMIS as an institutional locus proves to be insufficient, it may be bolstered by coordination mechanisms whereby actors are required to work within a common operational framework. Experience shows that this is easier to achieve if there is a continuity of key actors - between facilitators of a peace agreement and those who will help implement it - and/or if there are “Friends” groups which may be an important source of strategic coordination among bilateral actors and a means by which the SRSG or others may bolster their authority and coordinating powers vis-à-vis the parties and implementing agencies.

Third, it must be recognised that *the reality of peacebuilding and reconstruction in Sudan as elsewhere lies in power and politics*. Outsiders must be sensitive to the inevitable politics of peacebuilding and not, for the sake of interventions alone, get ahead of the local political dynamics. Even an effective disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) program requires deep and current knowledge of the political context and its dynamics, such as the particular interests and organisational capacities of militias, whom to demobilise, whom to train for a new army and police, the effect of war-time on the assumptions made for reintegration, details of the bargaining during peace negotiations, and local mechanisms for security that have survived the war, developed during the war, or traditions that can be revived.

Sudan will be no exception. In fact, the developmental prospects of the entire country will depend in large measure on what coalition of interest groups succeeds in dominating the peace and whether this coalition does or does not reflect largely development-oriented needs, those that support a progressive economic and social development.

While it is generally agreed that the international community has made progress in recent years in the actual capacity to plan and implement the emergency phase of a peace mission, there has still so far been a capacity gap in sustainability (a focus on crisis, rather than long-term development) as well as insufficient capacity for policy - manifested in e.g. the growing menu of activities and agencies engaged in a peacebuilding mission and including the apparent inability to engage sufficiently with the politics of the peacebuilding process. It will be important for successful peace implementation in Sudan that such weaknesses are minimised or removed.

As a final point, it is important to add that *success will primarily depend on the Sudanese themselves taking on major responsibilities for the implementation of the CPA as well as the coordination of activities and aid management*. The international community must not be seen as interfering too much in policy-making and day-to-day activities. Also, appropriate aid can help to build peace, whereas inappropriate aid can fuel war and erode rather than enhance local capacity. Coordination, therefore, is not just for external actors to achieve, but also for the host government to manage. Sudan must break the “low ownership trap” through capacity- and competence-building. There must be a progressive transfer of ownership (technical and political) in the management of aid. This will take time, particularly in the

south, and will also require great sensitivity and sufficient knowledge by all those who are now ready to assist in long-term peace implementation in Africa's largest and still quite divided country.