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No peace without youth: Continued calls for change in South Sudan

The UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security (2015) calls for youth to be included in peace negotiations worldwide. In South Sudan, where 70 percent of the population is below the age of 30, youth have been included in the national dialogue aiming at ending violence and conflict in the country. A year after the dialogue ended, however, youth delegates are still waiting for a breakthrough as violence continues and tension is on the rise. This brief is based on interviews with youth activists in Juba in 2021 and discusses steps towards youth inclusion and lasting peace in the world's newest country.

Peace agreements, but no peace

South Sudan is the world's newest nation which got its independence from Sudan on 9 July 2011, after decades of civil war. The new government included representatives of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), headed by President Salva Kiir. There was optimism for better days to come both within South Sudan and internationally, as bilateral and multilateral donors supported both the government and the newly established UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) with a mandate to strengthen the capacity of the South Sudanese government.¹

Less than three years later, the fragile unity within the ruling political party SPLM/A collapsed. On 15 December 2013, ethnic fighting broke out in the Presidential Guard as forces loyal to President Kiir, mainly from the Dinka tribe, fought Nuer forces loyal to Vice President Riek Machar. Within days, the fighting spread to several states, starting an ethnically targeted civil war with large-scale sexual- and gender-based violence.²

In August 2015, a peace agreement between Kiir and Machar was signed. However, renewed fighting started less than a year later, with heavy fighting in Juba and surroundings.³ In late 2017, a ceasefire was reached between Kiir and Machar, followed by the signing of a revitalised peace agreement in September 2018 and the forming of a 'government of national unity' in February 2020.⁴ Kiir remained as President of the new government which allowed Machar back as Vice-President.

The revitalised peace agreement has reduced large-scale political violence between main parties, but vital parts of the implementation are incomplete, particularly those concerning political commitments and the unification of military forces.⁵ The delay in implementation has caused frustration and an increase in sub-national and intercommunal violence.⁶ In April 2021, the UN Panel of Experts on South Sudan warned of a potential return to large-scale conflict and stressed that urgent engagement was needed to avert this scenario.⁷ Additionally, the humanitarian situation in South Sudan is dire, with more people in need of humanitarian assistance than ever before.

The government continues to impose bureaucratic barriers to the delivery of humanitarian aid.⁸

Despite the fragile situation, presidential, legislative, and state-level elections are currently being planned for 2023. Many believe elections will not actually take place at that time, as the transitional period for the current government has already been extended twice. There have also been delays in the completion of a voter's register and on the implementation of the peace agreement from 2018, particularly on unified command-and-control structures of the national security institutions.⁹

A global call for youth in peace processes

Since the adaptation of the UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security in December 2015, youth-led peace initiatives, actions and projects have become more visible worldwide. Around the world, youth are using this momentum to access new spaces, strike partnerships and mobilise support for their work. Youth-led non-governmental organisations have increased rapidly. Yet, there is still a long way to go when it comes to youth inclusion in parliaments. Globally, the proportion of Members of Parliaments (MPs) under the age of 30 is 2.6 percent, according to the 2021 report by the Inter-Parliamentary Union.¹⁰ This is an increase of 0.4 percentage points compared to two years ago.

As young people usually make up a large percentage of combatants among warring parties in a conflict, the inclusion of youth in peacebuilding, peacekeeping and peace negotiations is vital. Young people must not be excluded from decisions that will have a direct impact on their present and future. The UN Secretary General's recent report on Youth concluded that young people's participation in peace processes is an essential element for the sustainability of peace agreements and peace processes (UN SG report, 2020).¹¹

The report furthermore concludes that there can be no peace without youth being involved and draws the link between excluded youth and a heightened risk for violent extremism. One of the ways of ensuring that young people

- 1 UN Security Council, 2011. 'Resolution 1996, S/RES/1996 (2011)', 8 July 2011. Online: <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/ct/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C8CD3-CF6E4FF9%7D/Sudan%20SRES%201996.pdf>
- 2 UNMISS, 2014. 'Conflict in South Sudan: A Human Rights Report', 8 May 2014. Online: [Conflict in South Sudan: A Human Rights Report, 8 May 2014 | UNMISS \(unmissions.org\)](#)
- 3 IGAD, 2015. 'Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS)', 17 August 2015. Online: <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/Agreement%20on%20the%20Resolution%20of%20the%20Conflict%20in%20the%20Republic%20of%20South%20Sudan.pdf>
- 4 IGAD, 2018. 'Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS)', 12 September 2018. Online: <https://docs.peacpa.org/2016/02/South-SudanPeace-Agreement-September-2018.pdf>
- 5 Berdal, M., Shearer, D., 2021. 'Hard Lessons from South Sudan'. Survival, Global Politics and Strategy, Volume 63, no,5, October-November 2021, pp.69-96. Online: [Full article: Hard Lessons from South Sudan \(tandfonline.com\)](#)
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 UN Panel of Experts, 2021. 'Letter dated 14 April 2021 from the Panel of Experts on South Sudan addressed to the President of the Security Council. Online: [S_2021_365_E.pdf \(ecoi.net\)](#)
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 UNMISS, 2021. 'Briefing to the UN Security Council by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for South Sudan, Nicholas Haysom'. 15 September 2021. Online: [Briefing to the UN Security Council by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for South Sudan, Nicholas Haysom | UNMISS \(unmissions.org\)](#)
- 10 Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021. 'Youth participation in national parliaments'. Online: [Youth participation in national parliaments | Inter-Parliamentary Union \(ipu.org\)](#)
- 11 UN Secretary-General, 2020. 'Youth and peace and security'. 2 March 2020. Online: <https://undocs.org/en/S/2020/167>

do not engage in violence and violent extremist acts is by offering alternative peacebuilding spaces, as well as the possibilities of actual participation and influence over political processes.

South Sudan's National Dialogue

In December 2016, President Salva Kiir called for an inclusive national dialogue in South Sudan under the slogan: "Come let's dialogue, come let's heal our nation." The stated goal was to end all violence in the country. At that time, South Sudan's civil war was ongoing and would last for two more years. Some participants and international observers questioned the value of a national dialogue during an ongoing civil war with mass displacement, staggering food insecurity, and consistent reports of human rights violations and closing political space.¹²

The main opposition leader, Riek Machar, declined to participate in the dialogue, and ongoing fighting made opposition-controlled areas difficult to reach. Some other armed groups also decided not to participate.¹³ Despite obstacles, the national dialogue started in May 2017. In response to criticism, Kiir stepped down from his role as chair some months into the dialogue. The steering committee of the National Dialogue subsequently negotiated confidence-building measures, including the release of some political prisoners.¹⁴ These measures brought in more participants.

Youth participation

When the dialogue ended in November 2020, it had brought together 20,000 South Sudanese, including 520 delegates from South Sudan's 79 counties and Abyei Area, a contested border area between Sudan and South Sudan. The grassroots participants included farmers, women, youth, and religious leaders.¹⁵

On paper, the 50 youth delegates were included on the same level as other delegates in the dialogue. The reality, however, was that many of them had to argue with the chairperson and the secretariat of the dialogue to be heard.

Some were told to respect their elders when they tried to take the floor. Others were expected only to take notes, and not to voice their opinions. In frustration, a group of youth stood up in the large meeting room where the dialogue took place, walked up to the podium, and demanded to be heard. They sat down by the podium in a silent protest until they were given a time slot to present their messages.

– We had worked together to prepare a youth statement and wanted to be given the opportunity to present it. After the protest in front of the podium, we were given a time slot the following day. It would have been better if the program initially allowed for us to speak, so that we did not have to protest to make it happen, one youth delegate said.

– The most difficult matter during the dialogue was to be taken seriously as a young person, another youth delegate said.

Criticism of the government and youth demands

As a surprise to many, the conclusions of the dialogue included candid critique of the current government. South Sudan was characterised as a failed state, unable to provide social services to the people, unable to create new jobs, unable to ensure internal cohesion, territorial integrity, and unable to monopolise the use of coercive force. Difficult issues such as impunity, corruption and the disappearance of oil revenue were also addressed in the outcome document.¹⁶

Despite this criticism, youth were generally proud to have been part of the national dialogue in South Sudan.

– I was glad to be part of a process where peace was the end goal, especially as youth in South Sudan are regarded by many as part of the problem, not the solution, said one youth activist.

– Politicians should no longer drag young people into the conflict by using them as soldiers, said another youth activist.

Youth delegates emphasised support for the outcome document, which included their main demands. One of their suggestions for peace was for president Salva Kiir to resign, although there is no sign that the 70-year-old president will do so just yet. 20 percent youth inclusion in all levels of government was another suggestion from the youth delegates. This was passed as a conference recommendation for the national constitution review, along with the recommendations to increase governmental representation for women from 25 percent to 35 percent, and 5 percent for persons with disabilities.

The majority of young people in South Sudan face enormous challenges related to food insecurity, access to education, and a lack of job opportunities. The scarcity of schools is particularly challenging in rural areas. This is happening in the context of overarching neglect of the citizenry by the government, corruption, ethnic based violent conflict, and competition for control of the economy

12 Murray, E., Stigant, S., 2021. 'National Dialogues in Peacebuilding and Transitions – Creativity and adaptive thinking'. United States Institute of Peace, June 2021, No.173. Online: [pw_173-national_dialogues_in_peacebuilding_and_transitions_creativity_and_adaptive_thinking.pdf \(usip.org\)](https://www.usip.org/publications/national-dialogues-in-peacebuilding-and-transitions-creativity-and-adaptive-thinking)

13 Mohajer, O., Deng, D., 2021. 'South Sudan's people have spoken on peace. Is anyone listening?' United States Institute for Peace. Online: [South Sudan's people have spoken on peace. Is anyone listening? | United States Institute of Peace \(usip.org\)](https://www.usip.org/publications/south-sudan-s-people-have-spoken-on-peace-is-anyone-listening)

14 Murray, E., Stigant, S., 2021. 'National Dialogues in Peacebuilding and Transitions – Creativity and adaptive thinking'. United States Institute of Peace, June 2021, No.173. Online: [pw_173-national_dialogues_in_peacebuilding_and_transitions_creativity_and_adaptive_thinking.pdf \(usip.org\)](https://www.usip.org/publications/national-dialogues-in-peacebuilding-and-transitions-creativity-and-adaptive-thinking)

15 Mohajer, O., Deng, D., 2021. 'South Sudan's people have spoken on peace. Is anyone listening?' United States Institute for Peace. Online: [South Sudan's people have spoken on peace. Is anyone listening? | United States Institute of Peace \(usip.org\)](https://www.usip.org/publications/south-sudan-s-people-have-spoken-on-peace-is-anyone-listening)

16 Republic of South Sudan, 2020. 'The South Sudan National Dialogue: Report of the rapporteur to the National Conference.' 3 November 2020. Online: [Rapporteurs-Report.pdf \(ssnationaldialogue.info\)](https://www.ssnationaldialogue.info); Sudan Post, 2020. 'Full-text: Final report of South Sudan's National Dialogue'. 17 December 2020. Online: [FULL-TEXT: Final report of South Sudan's National Dialogue – Sudans Post](https://www.sudanpost.com)

and natural resources. Most young women and men rely on informal sector trade, agricultural production, and market and food service work to earn money to live. This means that youth are particularly at risk of voluntary or forced recruitment into government militias, armed opposition groups, or the national security sector forces. These options, at best, provide only poverty-level income.

Youth delegates called for a more inclusive and unifying education system in South Sudan. The idea was for primary schools, secondary schools, and high schools to be open to a mix of ethnic groups and tribes, unlike the current segregated education system, where young people are mixed only when entering the universities.

– This could be an important step towards increased understanding and respect of one another, and maybe that is what we need before lasting peace can be a reality, said one youth activist.

Lack of implementation and a shrinking space for youth activism

One year after the dialogue finished, recommendations in the outcome document have not been implemented. The South Sudanese people are increasingly frustrated, and tension is building up in the country. President Salva Kiir, who called for the dialogue in the first place, seems not to be satisfied with the results.

The National Dialogue created a platform for people to speak their minds without being threatened. However, youth in South Sudan raised concerns about shrinking civic space in the country, noting a downward trend since the dialogue ended one year ago, with more people now fearing for their lives. Some youth activists report persecution, with some saying they have been followed multiple times by security guards linked to the government. Others have noticed that their social media accounts have been monitored. Youth-led radio programs have been cancelled. There are reports of at least one youth activist recently fleeing the country after having criticised the government, and of others being imprisoned.

Conclusions

The outcome document of the national dialogue includes candid criticism of the current government and has yet not been implemented. Youth delegates in the dialogue had issues that they raised heard and taken seriously in the process. Since the dialogue ended in November 2020, they have reported a shrinking civic space in South Sudan, including threats, persecution, and imprisonment of youth activists. In this country, more than 70 percent of the population is under the age of 30.¹⁷ There is an urgent need to include youth in all peacebuilding initiatives in South Sudan in an inclusive manner, and to include youth political processes in the planning of the upcoming presidential election in 2023.

In addition to the unstable security environment and an ongoing humanitarian crisis, the main challenges for youth in South Sudan are lack of access to education and lack of job opportunities.

Recommendations

- No peace without youth: Include youth in all peace building initiatives.
- Increased financial support to youth-led peace initiatives.
- Include youth in the planning for the 2023 elections.
- Provide and support opportunities for more young people to participate in local government.
- Considering the fact that most youth rely on informal jobs, review microfinance initiatives, funding mechanisms for livelihood projects, and look at collective financial opportunities for youth.
- Address the disparity between urban and rural educational opportunities for young people in South Sudan, and establish schools where children of all ethnic groups can learn together.

¹⁷ UN Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, 2020. 'UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth visits South Sudan'. Online: [UN Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth visits South Sudan – Office of the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth](#)