

# The People-To-People Peace Process<sup>1</sup>

Wunlit: The West Bank Nuer-Dinka Peace and Reconciliation Conference

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## **Failed High-Level Mediation**

In 1991, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) experienced a disastrous split. Ethnicity was only one of the reasons for this, but nevertheless it became a major issue that led to the massacre of thousands of civilians in the two main ethnic groups in southern Sudan, the Dinka of Dr. John Garang and the Nuer of Dr. Riek Machar.<sup>2</sup> From an early stage, the Church attempted to mediate between them. At times it appeared that they were very close to achieving a reconciliation, but ultimately the attempts failed. The two men were not prepared to reconcile.

## **People to People**

In 1994, partly as a result of the split, the mainstream Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) convened the Chukudum Convention, bringing together several hundred people from all over southern Sudan. This was the beginning of a change to make the movement more democratic and accountable, to improve its human rights record, to strengthen its political wing and to institute a civil administration in the "liberated areas." In July 1997, this was followed by a meeting in Kajiko, near Yei (southwestern of South Sudan), to iron out differences that had developed between the Church and the movement. It was a fiery meeting but ended well, with the SPLM/A mandating the Church to handle peace and reconciliation.

The ecumenical body in the liberated parts of Sudan, the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC), discerned that since it had failed to bring together the two principals, it would start at the other end of the spectrum, with the grassroots, initially integrating three different elements: traditional peacebuilding techniques, Gospel values and peacebuilding techniques. Consequently, in June 1998, a meeting was held in Lokichoggio, northern Kenya, bringing together influential chiefs and elders from the Dinka and Nuer communities on the west

<sup>1</sup> Based on Chapter 6 of *The Voice of the Voiceless: The Role of the Church in the Sudanese Civil War 1983-2005*, by John Ashworth, Paulines Publications Africa, Nairobi, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> The reasons for the split included a power struggle between individuals; ethnicity; a poor human rights record and a lack of democracy within the movement; and disagreement over whether the main aim of the liberation struggle was independence for South Sudan or a new, democratic, secular dispensation for the whole of a united Sudan.

bank of the Nile, along with church leaders.<sup>3</sup> This was the first time in almost ten years that they had been able to meet, and it constituted a first step in building trust, which was to become one of the key elements of the People to People Peace Process. This trust was developed in part through the telling of their stories, the second key element of the peace strategy.

At the Lokichoggio Chiefs' Peace Meeting, the leaders began to recall how they and their ancestors had historically dealt with conflicts and restored peace. Thus, the third key element emerged: the use of traditional peacebuilding techniques. A fourth aspect followed quickly: "We are capable of making reconciliation even if Garang and Riek are not present. Don't blame them – we are capable of making peace. We are responsible." This fourth element was that the community is the primary actor in peacebuilding. At one point an elderly bishop held a heavy wooden chair, called the Chair of Leadership, above his head, clearly straining from the effort to do so, and cried, "Who will help me with this burden?" A chief rushed forward to help him, and a fifth element, symbolism and imagery, came into play.

An agreement was signed and immediately enacted. "I will allow the Nuer to come to my grazing area and water points starting in January [1999], so they will know we are serious about this peace," said one Dinka chief.

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A great deal of practical preparation then ensued. Local people and the military factions controlling the area had to be mobilised, to say nothing of the donors. There were major logistical problems to be resolved, as well as security issues. Perhaps the most important and emotionally powerful part of the preparation was the exchange visits in which five chiefs and a women's representative from each community, accompanied by church leaders, visited the other community. Traditional rituals were performed. There was great fear, but also great courage, joy, hospitality and reciprocity. At one point, chiefs from one community offered to act as hostages to guarantee the safety of the others: the offer strengthened their resolve and was graciously declined. Seeing the opposing chiefs in their own territory, people became convinced that a real peace process was under way.

<sup>3</sup> Both communities are also found elsewhere in South Sudan, but the process began on the west bank.

A relatively obscure Dinka area called Wunlit was chosen for the first main peace conference in February-March 1999. A whole new village of 150 mud and thatch houses, plus a conference hall, had to be built from scratch. Cooking facilities had to be provided, boreholes drilled, latrines dug, the dirt road repaired, and an airstrip created. Hundreds of delegates (of whom one-third were women) and hundreds more support staff congregated there, a total community of up to 2,000 people, all in the centre of an active war zone. Transport had to be arranged, although many people walked there, often from far away. There were several working languages used at the conference. It was a community effort.

It is difficult to capture the atmosphere of such a meeting.<sup>4</sup> Each clan group was composed of six official representatives under the chief, with the six representatives including two elders and two women. One of the high points was the slaughter of a white bull ("Mabior" in the local language):

Mabior is the Bull of Peace that will be sacrificed for reconciliation and peace ... Anyone who breaks this commitment to peace will follow the way of Mabior ... The elders are making a peace and are taking an oath not to repeat atrocities previously committed. A curse is placed on any who partake of the Mabior sacrifice and later break the oath ... It is a very serious curse; it is a curse of death.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the meeting was preoccupied with the sixth element of the process: truth. In the Nilotic tradition, peace can only truly be achieved when everyone knows fully what wrongs were committed. The two communities were each given an opportunity to tell their story, to "vomit out" all the suffering and bitterness. It was a painful time for all involved. While there was later an opportunity for rebuttal, often there was none. Both sides acknowledge the truth of the accusations, but also recognised that they had each suffered in a similar way at the hands of the other. This led to agreements including practical actions for peace, followed by the signing of a covenant. To ensure this follow up, Peace Councils were formed and to date there has been no major breach of the peace accord on the west bank.

<sup>4</sup> See NSCC, 2002, pp 59-61 for a credible attempt to do so.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p 60

The role of the women was crucial. The men tended to speak for a long time, recounting the whole histories of related issues. The women, conversely, were brief and to the point, expressing the wish for the conflicts to stop; stating how they were saddened at the loss of their husbands and sons and the abduction of daughters; and how they would like to see the banning of guns. The women reminded the men of women's traditional influence on war and peace and threatened "a revolution ... we will stop giving birth."

While the Peace Councils were very successful, the one glaring omission was "the peace dividend" that was expected to be provided by international partners. The agreement called for the establishment of community police groups, with radios for communication.

Humanitarian aid was also requested. People began to return to their homes from where they had been displaced; water points, shelter, schools and clinics were all needed to replace those that had been destroyed. Food was needed to help them to settle in, as well as for the host communities who shared what little they had with the returnees. Seeds and tools were needed to break the cycle of dependency on relief aid. But very little assistance came from the international community. It seemed they were happy to support the high-profile peace conference, but always had excuses to avoid supporting the low-visibility follow-up.

### ***Waat and Liliir***

The process then moved to the east bank. Meetings were held in Waat (October 1999) and Liliir (May 2000). The situation on the east bank was complicated by various factors, including the number of different ethnic groups involved and various political considerations. The result was that there was not such a clear-cut resolution as there had been in Wunlit. Nevertheless, progress was made, it being recognised that peace-building is not based on "successful" one-off peace conferences, but on a long process that has its ups and downs.

### ***Strategic Linkages***

By November 2000, it was time to take stock and evaluate the process. Dr. Riek Machar had terminated his alliance with Khartoum but was still fighting against SPLA. A meeting designated "Strategic Linkages" was held in the village of Wulu on the west bank, bringing together representatives

from all the other conferences. Their basic message was: "We have made peace, but it is our sons who continue to encourage conflict" (referring of course to Dr. John and Dr. Riek). There was a clear recognition that while ethnic conflict often has its own roots, the ethnic nature of the conflict is often manipulated and exacerbated by political and military interests.

This led to "Strategic Linkages 2," held in the Kenyan city of Kisumu in June 2001. This brought together traditional leaders, elders and women from the grassroots with civil society, politicians, intellectuals, diaspora and representatives of the various factions of the liberation movements.

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The conference nearly didn't take place. The SPLM/A declined the

NSCC's invitation and physically blocked the participation of citizens in areas under SPLM/A control. The SPLM/A failure to endorse the conference made the NSCC aware of a final important element: empowerment. The NSCC had originally set out to make peace, but empowerment of all the parties involved was an inevitable result of the process. The SPLM/A felt challenged by this dynamic.

The underlying message from Kisumu to both leaders was, "We fully support the liberation struggle and Dr. John's leadership of it, but it is unacceptable that you continue the conflict between yourselves: You must unite." The conference called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, open dialogue to resolve political differences, and self-determination as the central objective of the liberation struggle.<sup>6</sup> Dr. John and Dr. Riek subsequently signed a peace agreement on 6 January 2002.

The reunion of the two main factions significantly reduced the suffering of the people on the ground and hastened the end of the civil war. Negotiations sponsored by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD),<sup>7</sup> an eight-country trading bloc in Africa, resulted in the January 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), ultimately leading to the referendum in January 2011 and independence for South Sudan in July 2011. The IGAD negotiations were strictly be-

<sup>6</sup> Kisumu Declaration, 23 June 2001.

<sup>7</sup> IGAD comprises the countries of Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda.

tween the two warring parties, but the Church “shadowed” them with a series of meetings in Entebbe, Uganda, which brought together individuals, parties, militia, movements and others from both northern and southern Sudan, and thus influenced the IGAD process from the sidelines. This ‘Entebbe Process’ was a direct continuation of the People to People Peace Process.

### Model

The People to People Peace Process has been recognised as a model of grassroots peacemaking. Many NGOs have tried to copy it, usually without much success. To begin with, the NGOs lack the credibility and moral authority of the Church. In addition, they usually focus on high-visibility conferences, neglecting the years of patient preparation that are required before any major conferences are held. They also neglect the key elements that underpin the process: trust; story-telling; traditional methods; the recognition of the community as the primary actor; symbolism and imagery; truth; a peace agreement with practical measures for implementation and follow-up; and empowerment.

A conference of several hundred people engaged in telling their painful stories and acknowledging the truth cannot be tightly time-tabled, finished and agreed within three days. These conferences must be allowed to continue as long as is necessary, even over many days or weeks, while the process itself may take years. Decades of conflict and trauma cannot be overcome in a few months. Quick fixes do not work. While the church is of course concerned to stop immediate violence, it nevertheless recognises that peace is not merely the absence of war; “Stopping the war is essential, but not sufficient for the establishment of a just and lasting peace.”<sup>8</sup>

The NSCC did not have access to modern “peace studies;” at that time little literature was available. For the Sudanese Church, the call to peace and reconciliation dawned slowly. Much of the work was reactive, with no long-term strategy or plan. The team sat together after each step and planned the next step, but they hardly knew where the process would go beyond that. It was an “emergent” process.

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During those early forays into peace work, the Church in Sudan was unaware of the sterling work of Mennonite John Paul Lederach and his pyramid model in which he identifies grassroots, mid-level and high-level components of peacebuilding.<sup>9</sup> The NSCC first attempted (and failed) to reconcile the leaders (high-level), then went back to the grassroots. From the grassroots, the wisdom of the elders expressed at the first Strategic Linkages conference led the NSCC to the midlevel

(“We have made peace; it is our sons who are the problem now.”). From there, pressure was exerted on the principals to make peace at the high level, and at the same time the church entered the high-level national peace process via the Entebbe Process and international advocacy. Peacebuilding mobilises both horizontal and vertical dynamics.

Elsewhere, Lederach comments, “I am uneasy with the growing technique-oriented view of change in settings of violence that seems to dominate much of professional conflict resolution approaches.”<sup>10</sup> He speaks of “invoking the moral imagination ... which is not found in perfecting or applying the techniques or the skills of a process ... My feeling is that we have overemphasised the technical aspects and political content to the detriment of the art of giving birth to and keeping a process creatively alive,”<sup>11</sup> of leaving space for serendipity, intuition, art and the web of relationships.

All this would be familiar to those who work for peace in Sudan. Indeed, it could be said that rather than designing a process, People to People opened up a space whereby the people themselves could pursue peace and reconciliation; the process was designed as a result of what emerged within that space. Sudan and South Sudan have become a laboratory for peacebuilding, and the experience of their peace pioneers now informs international thinking.

9 Lederach, 1997, p 39.

10 Lederach, 2005, p 52.

11 Lederach, 2005, p 70.

8 *Let There Be A Just and Durable Peace in the Sudan: An Appeal by the Bishops of the Catholic and Episcopal Churches of Sudan*, Nairobi, 17 August 2001.

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