

Grounding local peace organisations: a case study of southern Sudan

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ABSTRACT

Since the early 1990s, building peace during and after conflict has been moving away from the conference tables of diplomats to informal settings created by local NGOs. The vast majority, if not all, of the peacebuilding policy and literature argues for strengthening local organisations as vehicles for peace. This paper starts from the observation that there is a dire lack of organisational perspective to the processes set into motion. Current local peacebuilding policy, we argue, is based on analyses that are far removed from the everyday practices of the actors engaged in peacebuilding. The paper offers instead a qualitative approach that gives central attention to the dynamics of peace organisations and the way conflict is experienced in the everyday life of local people. It analyses the case of one local women's peace organisation: the 'Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace'. Peacebuilding is done by people, and the dynamics of their organisation are crucial for its success. The paper argues that a process approach to peace organisations will enhance agencies' efforts for local peacebuilding. Such an approach focuses on the question how actors in and around organisations give meaning to an organisation. The paper outlines this approach, presents five central properties of local peace organisations, and discusses what lessons can be learnt from this perspective for the practice of peacebuilding.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, building peace during and after conflict has been moving away from the conference tables of diplomats to informal settings created by local NGOs. The emphasis on local capacities for peacebuilding, Track Two Diplomacy in foreign affairs jargon, is said to follow the changing nature of post-Cold War conflicts.¹ These conflicts are seen as increasingly intra-state in nature, and occur in areas where state institutions have broken down, inflict violence, or form the roots on which

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people's grievances grow. In these situations, conventional (diplomatic) methods for building peace no longer apply, and civil society actors' contribution to conflict resolution appears an alternative and better channel for peacebuilding.²

Marked by the agenda of human security, launched by the UN in 1991, peace is increasingly defined as something more than the absence of war. The discourse emphasises the linkages between political, economic and social aspects of development and security, and argues for an integrated approach to peacebuilding. Sustainable peace has become a twin concept to sustainable development, and entails that peace must include conditions for the prevention of future conflict. A healthy civil society is seen as both a necessary condition for and an achievement of sustainable peacebuilding. Most, if not all, peacebuilding policy and literature argues for strengthening local organisations as vehicles for peace.

While the international community has discovered the potential of local peacebuilding and aims to strengthen local organisations to do the job, we find that there is a dire lack of organisational perspective to the processes set in motion. Current local peacebuilding policy, as we argue, is based on analyses that are far removed from the everyday practices of the actors engaged in peacebuilding. What is needed is a qualitative approach that gives central attention to dynamics of peace organisations, and the way conflict is experienced in the every day life of local people. This paper analyses the case of one local women's peace organisation, the 'Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace', and follows how this organisation derives meaning for the actors involved, their clients in the villages of southern Sudan, and its international supporters, bringing out how organisational processes are interwoven with the politics of peacebuilding.

The cases presented in the paper are based on ten months fieldwork by Mathijs van Leeuwen in 2001, and additional interviews in 2002 and 2003 as part of evaluation missions, in the context of a Disaster Studies research programme on peacebuilding policy and practice (van Leeuwen 2004).³ From January to November 2001, he worked with the Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace on behalf of a Dutch Peace Organisation (hereafter DPO), where he assisted the Nairobi management team, and set up a training-of-trainers programme for community theatre. For most of the time he stayed in Nairobi and Lokichoggio in the offices of SWVP, interspersed with visits to communities in southern Sudan. Six weeks were spent in Narus. Apart from the information obtained through working with SWVP and DPO, interviews were held with representatives of 27 international NGOs and UN organisations, 28 Sudanese

organisations, a number of donor representatives, and above all numerous women and men in the communities in southern Sudan. The field report on which the presentation is based was fed back to and approved by key actors of DPO and SWVP in 2004 (*ibid.*).

ORGANISATIONS FOR PEACEBUILDING

Peacebuilding interventions have mushroomed in the last decade, with an ever-widening range and scope of activities taken on by entities of all kinds, including governments, the United Nations, churches and the development community. Peacebuilding appears to mirror conflict in its complexity. Present-day conflicts are considered complex, as denoted in the phrase 'Complex Political Emergency'. They have multiple and changing causes, fluctuate in intensity through time and space, and local conflicts usually have international or even global dimensions. If conflict is complex, peace processes are, of course, equally if not more complex. There are multiple and changing motivations and impetus for peace. Peacebuilding is a long-term process, often with intermittent recurrence of violence.

When Boutros Boutros-Ghali launched the UN Agenda for Peace in 1992, he defined peacebuilding as: 'Action to identify and support structures that will tend to strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict.' Even though debate continues over whether the term should be restricted to particular political processes (Cousens 2000), international policy discourse on peacebuilding has become increasingly comprehensive. Exemplary is Lewer's (1999: 12) definition of the term as:

Non-violent processes which attempt to prevent, mitigate and transform violent conflict and contribute to building societies in which people have fair access to resources, which are based on social justice, and which respect fundamental human rights recognised under international law. The rebuilding of benign functional relationships is a vital part of this activity. Such processes should be rooted within the communities affected by the conflict and be sustainable locally. Peacebuilding usually requires a long-term commitment from local people and outside helpers, and can involve both cross-cutting (integrated into development and relief programmes) and stand alone approaches, and work at community or national levels, or both.

In this comprehensive definition, a central role is attributed to civil society. Many researchers of conflict conclude on the basis of fieldwork that the support of civil society is indispensable for peacebuilding (see Anderson 1996; Prendergast 1997; Richards 1996). Numerous INGOs and UN agencies have adopted this in their policies. Strengthening civil society

is considered crucial both as a means of achieving peace, and as a condition for making it last. Civil society organisations have become the implementation arm as well as the objective of many peacebuilding programmes.

The attention for strengthening civil society as part of peacebuilding programmes is contested too. Mark Duffield (2001) views this kind of peacebuilding as part of a package of liberal democracy that the West wants to export to and impose on war-torn societies. Peacebuilding policies have also been accused of bypassing the strengthening of (local) state structures, even where this may be more appropriate for functional and legitimising reasons (Crowther 2001). In peacebuilding practice the concept of civil society is often reduced to refer to NGOs. This may be at the expense of locally more meaningful organisations like churches, trade unions, community organisations and traditional leadership institutions (Hulme & Goodhand 2000: 21).

Our position in this debate is that building civil society is indeed crucial, but should not be the only focus and is no panacea in itself. Local-level peacebuilding should always be complementary to attention for nation-level, international and global processes intertwined with the conflict. Strengthening local capacities for peace is crucial because, in the first place, higher-level conflicts are always manifested locally in specific conflicts that need to be resolved on the ground. In the second place, once peace is established and international organisations withdraw from the scene, one needs resilient local institutions that can absorb, alter or resolve future tensions. However, having said that, we are convinced that local-level peacebuilding should be grounded in the empirical analysis of social and organisational processes. This means that we step away from questions like what civil society ought to be and should do. Instead we want to see how peacebuilding interventions get shaped in local realities. People are always organising and disorganising in manifold, formal and informal, ways. When peacebuilding organisations emerge from or are inserted into these local realities, we want to know where they come from, how they operate, and what determines their success or failure. To understand how peacebuilding activities work and what they do to enhance peace (or if they perhaps enhance conflict instead) requires insight into the dynamics of organisations.

THE MEANING OF ORGANISATIONS

Existing literature on peacebuilding NGOs has several shortcomings. It usually deals with international NGOs with their headquarters in the

United States or Europe, sometimes without the merest reference to NGOs in the rest of the world (e.g. Aall 1994; Anderson 2001; Voutira & Brown 1995). In addition, it hardly bothers to identify what organisational approach is taken. Implicitly, however, literature treats NGOs (and other organisations) as ‘things’, as if there is a single answer to the questions of what an NGO *is*, what it *wants* and what it *does*. There is, however, far more to organisations than their formal objectives, structures and activities. Since organisations are constituted by people who operate in multiple social settings, their structure may be very different from their boundaries and influence in practice. NGOs present different faces to different stakeholders, for instance in relating to donor representatives, clients or colleagues. Which is the real face, or in case they are all real, what does that mean for our understanding of these organisations and how do we determine their impact? There are always different ideas of what an organisation should be among and within staff, members or other stakeholders. How do these notions compete, what role do they play in shaping the practice of the organisation? How do the formal and informal aspects of organisation intertwine and affect its peacebuilding activities?

To unravel these questions, we have to take on board a dynamic approach to organisations (Hilhorst 2003). This starts by treating organisations not as things, but as open-ended processes. Viewing organisations as ‘things’ means that one conflates the organisation as it is presented – i.e. with particular objectives, a clear structure and a neat programme – with the real organisation as it is. Under the surface of the ‘thing’, however, one finds that organisations operate more like living organs (changing in relation to their environment), or appear as multi-faceted entities that cannot be captured in a single description. Organisations are many ‘things’ at the same time (Morgan 1986). They can be rationally organised according to an international blueprint for NGOs, and at the same time be social networks, income-generating projects, or arenas of competing factions. It is not clear in advance how these different identities coincide, interact, dominate, facilitate or divide. To explore these tensions that are inherent in NGOs, research cannot be limited to formal organisational features, structures and reports. Instead, it must take into account the everyday practices of the social actors in and around the organisation. Rather than taking organisations at face value, we have to ask and observe how their claims and performances acquire meaning in practice.

Our insistence on the importance of taking into account everyday practices in organisations is theoretically founded on an actor orientation.

Such orientation starts with the premise that social actors have agency (Giddens 1984; Long 1992). They reflect upon their experiences and what happens around them, and use their knowledge and capabilities to interpret and respond to development. An actor orientation implies that gauging why and how organisations come about and operate in the context of local and global developments requires studying their everyday practices. We must follow how actors define the situation, chose their goals and find room for manoeuvre to realise projects. We must try to make sense of people's motivations, ideas and activities by taking into account their past and present surroundings, social networks and histories. And we must observe the way they implement their activities, because this conveys practical knowledge, implicit interpretations, and power processes taking place in and around organisations.

The following cases discuss how Sudanese NGOs, community organisations and international organisations deal with peacebuilding processes in southern Sudan. We start with an introduction to the context of war and peacebuilding in Sudan, and discuss the growing attention of international organisations for the role Sudanese civil society could play in building peace. We then discuss the Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace (SWVP), an organisation that moved from a membership organisation to a women's movement to an NGO. The second case concerns one of the local women groups affiliated to SWVP. Both cases reveal how those organisations represented themselves as peace organisations, how their claims and performances acquired meaning in practice, and how they were shaped by their internal relations and the dynamics in their surroundings. In the final section of the paper we elaborate what this means for understanding peacebuilding organisations.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN CONFLICT: THE CASE OF SUDAN

Conflict in Sudan concerns the interplay of many conflicts that are manifested differently through time, space and scale. For more than 40 years a civil war between the government of Sudan in Khartoum and armed opposition movements has ravaged Sudan. While the southern resistance movement SPLA/M aimed to bring down the central government, factionalism within the insurgency resulted in regional conflicts between rebel militias. At the local level, this has inflamed or intensified local conflicts, fuelled by the widespread availability of light weapons, including inter-ethnic conflicts and conflicts over resources such as land and cattle; conflicts between communities and between displaced and local populations (Pax Christi 1999). Hence, conflict in Sudan ranged

from attacks by government helicopter-gunships killing up to a hundred villagers at a time, to fights and occasional deaths resulting from local cattle-raiding.

The last ten years have witnessed a series of international diplomatic interventions to address the North–South conflict. Prominent were the efforts under the aegis of IGAD (Inter-Governmental Authority on Development). Difficult issues in the negotiations were the principle of separation between state and religion, the right to self-determination of southern Sudan and other marginalised areas, the boundaries of southern Sudan, and the entitlement to the oilfields located in the border zone between the North and the South (for the latter issue see Verney 1999). Early in 2002, the two major factions in the South, SPLM (Sudan People’s Liberation Movement) and SPDF (Sudan People’s Defence Force), merged forces. This was followed by a ceasefire agreement between the Sudanese government and the SPLA, and the starting of peace talks in Kenya, under the auspices of IGAD. In 2004 a peace deal was signed, which was formalised early in 2005, by which time an insurgency in the western region of Darfur had turned into a new human tragedy.

Civil society in southern Sudan

Southern Sudan has a rich tradition of conflict resolution at the local level. Prendergast (1997: 80-2) gives several examples of how elders from different cattle-keeping communities in the border area between northern and southern Sudan were able to negotiate peaceful movement for the northern groups into the southern grazing areas, and of reconciliation efforts by Dinka and Nuer chiefs in 1993, as a response to inter-militia fighting. Several agreements have been reached between cattle-keeping groups in the border area of Kenya, Sudan and Uganda, as a result of combined efforts of army commanders and elders. These traditional governance structures have been severely eroded by population displacement, the power of the rebel armies and the large-scale conflicts in the region. In many areas their roles have been taken over by young rebel leaders, often sons of the elders. Nonetheless, traditional structures are still very important for local peace. In Narus (see below), the local army commander strongly relied on the local elders to bring peace between the Toposa and the SPLA.

Churches⁴ are the most locally present institutions in southern Sudan, and have played an important role in most initiatives for local peace. The Presbyterian Church, for example, sponsored travelling peace committees in Upper Nile (Prendergast 1997: 27). The New Sudan Council

of Churches (NSCC, comprising Catholic and Protestant churches in southern Sudan) initiated the People to People Peace Process (often referred to as '4Ps'); 4Ps consisted of a series of grass-roots peace and reconciliation conferences which started in Wunlit (Bahr el Ghazal) in early 1999. The conferences brought together traditional leaders, church leaders and community representatives, and resulted in an agreement for peace between Dinka and Nuer communities (OLS/UNICEF 2000). The conferences addressed and involved the effective authorities, i.e. the rebel movements, whose collaboration was a major condition for success. This strategy, however, also compromised NSCC in the eyes of some international donors, who came to believe that NSCC was affiliated to the SPLA/M.

Modern civil society organisations are a recent phenomenon in southern Sudan. Over the ten years to 2001, an estimated 65 organisations were formed, mostly in the format of an NGO.⁵ Most have their main office in Kenya or Uganda, and are established by Sudanese in exile. Most work in relief, and many of these have secondary objectives regarding peacebuilding. A few work primarily and actively on peace at the local level. Peacebuilding includes activities such as social healing, promoting dialogue and reconciliation, monitoring human rights violations, or the promotion of participatory government. Part of the work consists of the formation of community based organisations – in particular women and youth groups – in the communities.

The recent emergence of modern civil society organisations has to be understood in the context that until very recently institutional space for civil society initiatives was limited. Neither the colonial authorities nor the post-independence government were interested in the social, political and economical development of the South. The rebel movements were initially organised in strict top-down fashion. They did nothing to establish civil authority structures or to encourage civil society organisations. Internal discussion and occasional protest from local populations about the lack of engagement of the rebels with non-military people and institutions led to an SPLA convention in 1994, stating the resolution to build civil structures (see Lesch 1998; SPLM 2000). Since then, new administrative structures have been set up in several areas. The roles and responsibilities of army, civil administration, traditional leaders and civil society have been stipulated by the SPLM, but still need to gain empirical reality. Their establishment is hampered by the *de facto* resistance of local military commanders, little grasp of the division of responsibilities, and a lack of experience of office bearers, who often have a military past. A situation has thus

emerged where – not uncommon in conflict situations – civil authority structures and civil society have to be developed simultaneously. Many Sudanese and international organisations implicitly struggled with the questions of which road to take, or on which of the two to work at all.

(INTERNATIONAL) ORGANISATIONS STRENGTHENING
SUDANESE CIVIL SOCIETY

The humanitarian operation in southern Sudan is one of the longest in history, and since the mid 1990s UN organisations and INGOs have adopted the idea that relief must be made relevant to development and peacebuilding. Although different approaches can be discerned, international organisations consider that an orientation to development and peace requires investing in capacity building of local authorities and civil society organisations. The question is whether and how they can do this.

Development and/or peace?

The SPLM (2000) maintains a policy of ‘peace through development’, and this is also the strategy of many international organisations. The strategy aims to integrate the development of civil authorities and civil society with the provision of services. It is based on the notion that the root cause of local conflicts is often found in competition over resources. Hence, by providing additional resources and services, such as water points, conflict will be prevented or resolved. Most international organisations approach peacebuilding through development, although they find this difficult to realise in practice, with the capacity building components often lagging seriously behind. Both international and local NGOs have built expertise in the provision of services and much less in capacity building. A major problem is, of course, whether development projects that are not sustained with capacity building will still have a positive impact for peace. Unbalanced development is known to exacerbate conflict, and many conflicts require a political solution and not merely an investment in development. Several INGOs approach peacebuilding more directly. They focus for instance on training in conflict handling, the support of peace conferences, or the assistance of local women groups. In practice, there is not so much scope for direct peace work, because many local authorities and civil organisations are concerned that these activities are too political.

Strengthening civil authorities and/or civil society?

To organise relief, international organisations have always had to work with the authorities of the rebel movements and their humanitarian offices (such as the SPLA/M related SRRA). However, most organisations refrained from capacity building for the emerging civic authorities that were installed by the rebel movements, especially when the rival rebel movements were still active. International organisations were worried about compromising their image of neutrality by working with groups that could be considered party to conflict (Macrae *et al.* 1997). Slowly, some organisations became convinced that capacity building of the movement was necessary to upscale peacebuilding and development efforts. USAID and UNICEF, for instance, launched the STAR (Sudan Transitional Assistance for Rehabilitation) programme, to develop local authorities in rebel-held territories.

Investing in capacity building of local organisations?

The rhetoric on civil society notwithstanding, many international organisations were hesitant to invest in the capacity building of Sudanese NGOs. Many questioned the independence of NGOs, which were considered to be one way or the other linked to the rebel movements. Besides, questions abounded about the genuineness, democratic organisation and accountability of Nairobi-based Sudanese NGOs whose numbers had mushroomed in just a couple of years, partly because of the financial opportunities that had presented themselves in the wake of the relief operations. The problem of trust was exacerbated because NGOs, operating in a competitive field, often accused each other of linkages to the rebel movements or corrupt practices.

With the obvious exception of church-related INGOs, INGOs rarely considered encouraging development and peace by strengthening the capacities of church-related programmes, even though churches are the oldest civil society organisations and have the largest outreach and legitimacy in southern Sudan. There are some indications that INGOs had little confidence in church-related initiatives, which they suspected to be too much integrated with rebel movements. Instead of supporting existing structures of Sudanese NGOs or churches, most INGOs concentrated their capacity building efforts on creating Community Based Organisations in Sudan.

International organisations have thus taken on policies to strengthen local capacities, but found it difficult to put these into practice. Those organisations that do support local organisations, as we shall see below,

find indeed that it is a complicated process. Most organisations shy away from supporting existing organisations because of anecdotal evidence suggesting these do not fit into preconceived conditions about 'civil society' and 'local organisations'. Many of these organisations decide to by-pass supra-local structures and directly invest in organisation building at village level. Notwithstanding the question of whether local organisation building will meet the same complications, it should be asked whether such a strategy is sustainable.

THE SUDANESE WOMEN VOICE FOR PEACE

Since the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, there has been growing attention to the contribution of women in peacebuilding. This was also apparent in Sudan, where international organisations developed a strong discourse on gender and peace. Among the emerging women for peace initiatives were several initiatives to give women a more active voice in the IGAD. Amongst others, this was done through the 'engendering the peace' project, which was initiated by the Netherlands Embassy to bring women to the negotiating tables and grew into a separate organisation. Although these women were partly successful in participating in IGAD, it was generally felt that their influence was marginal, amongst other things because they felt they were not taken seriously by the SPLA/M (Hilhorst & van Leeuwen forthcoming). Most attention was given to the potential of women to build peace at the local level. The following case concerns what was for some time the most prominent women's organisation in southern Sudan: the Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace (SWVP). The narrative follows how the organisation evolved and changed in the interplay with its international supporters.

SWVP was born out of a meeting organised by an East African NGO, the People for Peace in Africa. When peace negotiations between southern rebel factions continued to fail, this organisation considered in 1993 that the wives of factional leaders could perhaps influence their husbands' opinions. A meeting was organised for the wives of significant political leaders. After a tumultuous start when a Nasir woman was physically attacked in the street outside the workshop venue, creating an instant conflict among the delegates, the workshop was nonetheless successful. The women decided to form an organisation promoting the interests of women. They did not want to engage in politics, which they wanted to leave to their husbands.

The Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace (SWVP) started in 1994 with the intention of uniting southern Sudanese women of different ethnic

groups and religions. SWVP wanted to accomplish 'what men have failed to achieve': peace in Sudan. SWVP emphasised the central role of women in the resolution of conflict. According to the founders, women as mothers are united in their desire not to see their sons killed in conflict. Besides, they consider they have more interest in peace, because they suffer more from war than men do. Finally, they were convinced that women by their innate character and by traditional heritage are natural peacemakers. The initial membership of SWVP consisted of wives of political leaders, and women who had become active in organisations and peacebuilding initiatives. Their ethnic origins were diverse, they were generally educated, and all lived in exile in Nairobi. SWVP thus started as a membership organisation in Nairobi that, due to its ethnic diversity, could claim to represent southern Sudanese women in peacebuilding processes. At the same time, they considered their group as the seed of a southern Sudan-wide women's movement for peace.

In the first year SWVP organised several public events to call attention to the plight of women and children in the war. They were able to get modest support, from bishops and UNIFEM, for membership training and a visit to southern Sudan for a workshop and to introduce the SWVP to the military command in the area. Within one year, after having had just one activity in southern Sudan, the organisation was launched internationally. A delegation of SWVP was invited to attend the Conference in Beijing, where they were exposed to international discourses on women and peace. Beijing furthered the visibility of SWVP, resulting in international support in the form of training, funding for activities and invitations to international events. Immediately after the initiation of SWVP, the organisation thus became discursively and organisationally intertwined with the international community working for Sudan.

In the five years following Beijing, SWVP started to move from a city-based membership organisation to a countrywide women's movement. The Nairobi members received training in conflict resolution and civic education, after which they trained and organised women's groups in ten communities of southern Sudan. SWVP facilitated workshops for peacebuilding and human rights advocacy, and for trauma counselling. Some of these were facilitated by international experts, flown in for the occasion. The Nairobi women started to present themselves as a chapter of a countrywide movement, even though the movement had not materialised in a formal sense and the groups had never had the opportunity to meet together. The Nairobi 'chapter' had grown by this time to about 90 members.

Among the international supporters of SWVP was DPO, a Dutch peace organisation, which assisted finding financial assistance in the Netherlands, facilitated some SWVP activities in the field, and included the case of Sudanese women in their European peace advocacy campaigns. In the course of time, SWVP and DPO visualised 'Seeds for Peace'. This programme aimed to empower local women to participate in conflict prevention and peacebuilding at the local and regional level. Part of the programme was the establishment of four regional 'Peace Demonstration Centres' that would function as focal points for awareness raising, training, and income generating activities. The programme was facilitated by DPO and SWVP, and financed by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. To take on the programme, SWVP had to register as an NGO, thereby transforming it into a service organisation for the local women groups in southern Sudan. This change in organisational identity signalled several problems.

Organisational problems

With Seeds for Peace, SWVP transformed itself from a voluntary organisation to an organisation with a few salaried members. It also changed from a flat organisation into one with specialised and differentiated functions. A final major change was that the budget of SWVP became much larger. This resulted in a number of organisational problems. Since only a few women received a salary, the other members of SWVP grumbled about the lack of fair recruitment procedures and started to reassess their willingness to work for SWVP as volunteers. The revision of tasks was little discussed and clarified, and led to all kinds of problems in the everyday division of responsibilities.

Though a few of the women had experience with working in (international) NGOs, they lacked experience in project planning and budgeting. SWVP's donors tried to remedy these problems by hiring consultants to improve the management and financial administration, but programme reporting and bookkeeping continued to lag seriously behind. The availability of relatively large funds put relations with the local 'chapters' of SWVP under strain. It raised unrealistic expectations, and stories about the possible misuse of funds by the Nairobi women started to circulate.

Interpersonal problems

The organisational problems stemming from Seeds for Peace exacerbated a number of problems between the women that had been

building up over previous years. Many SWVP women had undergone traumatic war experience and SWVP work was at times very stressful, especially in the field. This contributed to the fact that the women found it difficult to maintain good personal relations. The only experience SWVP women had with management was in military-style environments, and their authoritarian management style left little space to express discomfort about the state of affairs and resolve internal problems. Instead, an atmosphere of suspicion and gossip arose. This was made worse by the political chicanery surrounding peace organisations in a country at war. SWVP was vulnerable to the pull of political powers who wanted to co-opt its resources. Fearing such complications, the leaders of SWVP were very secretive about the organisation's resources, which in turn led to the wildest speculations within and around the organisation. A core group of women emerged who trusted each other, partly because they came from the same area and shared the same background. This had the unfortunate consequence that, when more and more women outside the 'trust group' left the organisation, SWVP lost its multiethnic character.

Donor relations

Another set of problems emerged in relations with and between donors. DPO is a Dutch church-related peace organisation that combined supporting local peace initiatives with lobbying activities in Europe for resumption of peace negotiations between the North and the South, and against oil companies' war-fuelling purchases of Sudanese oil. Its simultaneous involvement with local organisations helped to inspire and dignify its lobbying work. At the start, relations between DPO and SWVP were cordial, though not equal. DPO considered its relationship with SWVP as one of partnership and trust. SWVP valued the relationship with DPO, as one of its most consistent supporters. At the same time, they maintained relationships with other donors, using the competition that had unmistakably evolved among donors over this prominent women's organisation to their own advantage.

Seeds for Peace thoroughly changed the relationship between SWVP and DPO. Money from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs was administered by DPO, and as a result, DPO became more of a donor than an equal partner. DPO had to ensure that SWVP followed the funding conditions, which was perceived by the SWVP women as interference in their internal affairs. The DPO representative, on the other hand, gradually lost her confidence in the trustworthiness of the

women in Nairobi. Her intensive efforts to request, facilitate and eventually demand increased accountability and more visible activities in southern Sudan were not given substantial response. Finally, in the summer of 2002, DPO severed its ties with the Nairobi women of SWVP, and started to look for other channels to support peacebuilding in southern Sudan.

The problems experienced by SWVP were not entirely organisational. Working in conflict is subject to many practical and political constraints. Visiting the areas in southern Sudan is highly expensive and at times dangerous. Co-operation with the resistance movements and their humanitarian wings on the ground was not always easy, with SWVP representatives sometimes being suspected of fuelling tensions, or local officials interfering with its work. Nor, however, can what happened to women's peacebuilding be understood without taking into account the organisational dynamics in SWVP. The partly donor-driven transitions SWVP went through, from membership organisation to social movement to NGO, took their toll to the extent of jeopardising the entire organisation. In 2002, the many difficulties surrounding SWVP had given the organisation a very bad reputation. Rightly or wrongly, in the eyes of many bystanders, they had moved from an icon of hope for peace to a bunch of quarrelling women.

WOMEN'S PEACE DEMONSTRATION CENTRE IN NARUS

Before thinking through some of the implications of the SWVP story, let us discuss a second case. This consists of a local organisation affiliated to SWVP: the Peace Demonstration Centre in Narus.

Lifeworld and everyday conflict

Narus is located just over Sudan's border with Kenya in SPLM/A-held territory. Its population of about 8,000 consists of a majority of Dinka, a large number of Toposa (originating from the region), and smaller groups of displaced Equatorians, Nuba and Nuer. Narus has been hit several times by bombardments of the Sudanese army, and experiences different kinds of local conflict. Tension and suspicion between Toposa and Dinka has built up from the past when the (Dinka-dominated) SPLA occupied the area and forcibly recruited soldiers. Many Dinka soldiers settled in Narus and started occupying land. The resulting tension permeated the entire fabric of community life, resulting in a general 'culture of suspicion'.

Another source of local conflict is cattle-raiding and related violence. The people living in the area have a tradition of cattle-raiding, which is related to cultural institutions surrounding bride-wealth and masculinity. With the increasing availability of guns, cattle-raiding has become a deadly and escalating practice. According to many people, the insecurity and high levels of domestic violence in Narus partly resulted from the wide availability of alcohol. The relation between alcohol and local conflict is complicated, because the production of alcohol is at the same time one of the few income-earning opportunities available to women. An important local dimension of peace in Narus is the bishop of the Diocese of Torit. He was involved in reconciliation agreements between chiefs of different cattle-raiding groups.

Dreams and realities of a peace demonstration centre

The women group of SWVP in Narus started in 1997, with 15 participants from all major ethnic groups in Narus. SWVP-Narus set out to contribute to resolving local conflict. In 1998, for instance, they stopped the escalation of a fight between Dinka and Equatorians. In these conflicts, the women were not centre-stage actors, but played an important role in early warning and mobilising the appropriate authorities (Simonse 1999). The women of Narus soon wanted to extend their peacebuilding to surrounding communities, for which they wanted to build an office and compound where they could meet, receive and train visitors. To sustain the centre, it would include a shop and a tailoring workplace. When the centre never materialised, due to constraints to be discussed below, the women's group started to change. The women still wanted to address local conflict, but in addition the group turned more and more into a social, mutual support network. They had a monthly bible sharing after church, made home visits or went to the dispensary when a member or her child was ill, cooked together for the church, attended funeral rites, and collected money for needy people. Several of these activities were continuations of pre-SWVP social life, now headed under the label of SWVP. Apart from activities organised by outsiders, in particular the SWVP-Nairobi, there were no formal meetings. This had implications for the ethnic composition of the group. SWVP-Narus had come to operate as a social network, mainly of Toposa women. Only when official activities took place, with SWVP-Nairobi, did they invite other members. As a result, the women outside this network felt increasingly alienated from SWVP-Narus, and developed more comfortable relations with other (I)NGO initiatives for women that were ongoing in the area.

Dynamics in SWVP-Narus

An important constraint on the development of the peace demonstration centre was that it lacked the necessary resources and capacities, and supportive institutional environment. Most of the Narus women had to balance their activities for SWVP with taking care of children, and making a living through cross-border trade and participating in NGO projects, while often their husbands were absent. They had few resources to bring to the centre, and actually hoped that it would serve them as a future source of income. When this prospect faded, many of them lost interest and left. Another problem was that the skills to run projects and the organisational capacities of the group were limited, with for example only 3 out of 20 women capable of writing. SWVP Nairobi was a distant supporter that could not train the women in the daily running of an organisation. A major constraint was the lack of co-ordination between aid organisations at the local level. A number of churches, international and local NGOs in Narus provided income generating activities. Groups of women were loosely organised around such initiatives. Instead of collaborating or assisting the SWVP women's group, these preferred to bind individual women to their own initiatives.

The meaning of peace

How significant is SWVP-Narus for peace? This depends, of course, on how one defines peace and what expectations exist about peacebuilding. The Narus women were convinced that their activities were leading to a more peaceful society. They developed a definition of peace that started from below, from the unity of the core-family, and primarily worked on 'peace among ourselves', by cultivating peace in their families and homes. Besides, they considered development as an important prerequisite for peace. As they claimed, 'you cannot have peace in your mind without peace in your stomach'. They therefore considered their participation in income generating projects also as peace work. They maintained this mission as advocates for peace in the wider context of Sudan. As SWVP, they were often invited to other organisations' peace activities, where they could bring out their message for peace. Otherwise, they saw little opportunity to translate their mission into concrete activities. The North-South conflict and the bombardments were clearly beyond their realm of influence. Since most of their members were not from cattle-holding families, they also saw little scope in addressing cattle-raiding. Addressing alcohol-related violence, on the other hand, found no constituency in the

group because many of the Peace Demonstration Centre women brewed alcohol to earn an income.

The question is whether the significance of SWVP-Narus can only be read from its peace related activities. Clearly, for the women who constituted the organisation, peace (in a strict sense) was important, but did not have the overwhelming priority outsiders attribute to it. They were primarily occupied with the demands of making a living, and driven by the desire to realise good community relations in a more general sense. The group was very important for the identity and social relations of the women members, who found in it a venue in which to share the hardships of life with likeminded women. The concern of outsiders that SWVP-Narus lost credibility as a peacebuilding organisation because it had largely lost its multiethnic character was not shared by the women. The ethnic composition of the group seemed, in their perception, to present no barrier whatsoever to continuing their peace work.

Finally, we should mention the symbolic significance of groups like SWVP-Narus. Through their work, the concept of peace entered the everyday vocabulary of people in the community, which contributed to a slowly growing constituency for peace. This effect radiated far beyond their immediate activities. The fact that these women belonged to a larger women's movement for peace was widely known, and appealed to many men and women in and outside of Narus. We fully agree with Cynthia Cockburn (2000: 25), who concluded after her research into seemingly insignificant women's groups in post-war Bosnia that: 'It matters that these women's organisations survive, because they are potentially a social space (and a rare one) in which a genuinely transformative progressive revisioning of the social might happen after catastrophic societal failure.'

A PROCESS APPROACH TO PEACE ORGANISATIONS

These everyday accounts of local organisations can be put into perspective by adopting a process approach to organisations. By doing so, seemingly unrelated and mundane incidents of quarrelling women, and misunderstandings between donors and local groups, can be understood as part of the dynamics by which the wheeling and dealing of peacebuilding acquires meaning. To elaborate this approach, we identify five central properties of organisations. We shall discuss each of them in view of the presented cases and bring out what lessons can be learnt.

Organisations are an amalgam of different pedigrees

Though NGOs the world over look remarkably like each other and are obviously modelled on some international standard, they also reflect national, historical and cultural conditions (Tvedt 1998). NGOs and other organisations are the outcome of complicated processes and manifest locally grown organising patterns and state–society relations. SWVP and the Narus group went through several transformations that profoundly changed their meaning. SWVP moved from a membership organisation, with a Nairobi-based constituency and an important role for the wives of factional leaders, to a women’s movement, and finally to an NGO, mainly working in the countryside of southern Sudan, and with some paid staff. The Narus women group started as an informal social network, turned into a platform for inter-ethnic dialogue, brought together by outsiders, and finally became a mutual support group. When dealing with organisations in peacebuilding, it is thus wise to take into account their history and trace where they come from, and not restrict our interest in these organisations to how they operate in the context of conflict and peace (Bakewell 1999).

Organisations have multiple identities

Organisations are made up of people who have multiple identities. The SWVP women are committed peace activists, but at the same time they are women struggling with their own traumatic experiences from war, living in displacement and as providers for their families. These multiple identities are reproduced in the organisation, which represented for the women a peacebuilding organisation just as much as a venue to meet other women and a prospective livelihood. While people shape organisations, inconsistencies between the lifeworld of organisational actors and the objectives of the organisation can easily occur. Narus women’s dependence on brewing alcohol, for example, prevented the organisation from campaigning against alcohol, even though they were aware that alcohol was a major factor in local violence.

In general, the identity of an NGO is added to other forms of formal or informal organisation. Often, being a peace organisation is added on to other activities. Taken on as a temporary or marginal focus, this often leads to organisational crisis, when actors after some time start to question if and how this must become their core identity. All formal forms of organisation are, at the same time, social networks. These may coincide with the organisation, but more often organisations comprise different social networks, each of which is stretched beyond its original confines.

This makes the boundaries of organisations much less clear than appears on paper. How for instance should one delineate the women's networks in Narus, which linked up with different donor projects and appeared as separate organisations (with overlapping membership) in the reports of different agencies, each of which could claim to have successfully formed a local group?

Obvious lessons from this are that international organisations have to invest in gaining insight into these local dynamics, better coordinate in supporting local groups, and tone down their expectations of what local groups can achieve. A particular lesson can be derived from the importance of social networks in organisations. In both cases, informal social networks underlying the organisation provided more meaning, stability and coherence than its formal objectives and activities. These social networks tended to be single-ethnic in nature. In our view, this finding questions the high premium put on building peace through multiethnic organisations. The everyday running together of an organisation requires a level of social proximity and trust, far exceeding what is needed for a peaceful coexistence of groups in society, and demanding multiethnic participation may create more harm than good.

Organisations consist of multiple realities

There is no single answer to what an organisation *is*, what it *wants* and what it *does*. Organisations typically hinge around different discourses that each play a role in the way in which the organisation derives its meaning, and which are played out differently in different domains. A peacebuilding organisation may, for instance, simultaneously be a vehicle for the political ambitions of its leaders, and fundraisers for peace may in reality raise funds for warfare. The most notorious example is Rwanda, where despite its extremely high civil society density, genocide occurred partly because civil society actors turned out to have stronger loyalties to their government and ethnicity than to their principles (Uvin 2001). Rwanda stands out as the ultimate nightmare of a naïve support of civil society, but multiple realities of organisations always exist and are usually more innocent, as in the case of service NGOs whose informal objective is to generate job security for their staff.

SWVP was as much a peacebuilding organisation as a vehicle to strengthen the position of women. The Narus group was a mutual support group as well as a peacebuilding initiative. The different discourses

prevailing in NGOs are not necessarily a weakness: they can reinforce or contradict each other. This is rarely the subject of reflection, and often NGO people are not aware of these multiple realities. Creating such awareness can help organisations to identify and resolve inherent tensions.

Organisations are 'decentred'

Organisations do not derive their meaning only from their objectives and workplans; nor, contrary to popular belief, are they made by their leaders. Recent organisation theory emphasises that organisations are 'decentred' (Nuijten 1998; Stacey *et al.* 2000). The meanings of organisations evolve in practice, and result from the everyday negotiations of staff members and other stakeholders. All staff members reflect on the meaning of the organisation, the context in which they work, and the events that happen around them. Through their everyday practices, they display particular meanings of the organisation.

The different expectations and interpretations between the core group of SWVP and the more marginal members, as well as between SWVP Nairobi and women groups like the one in Narus, all had repercussions on how the organisations could function. This was exacerbated by the way outsiders responded to these dynamics. DPO, for instance, increasingly distanced itself from the Nairobi women and deliberately tried to give the local chapters centre-stage, amongst other means through financial conditions. The meaning of organisations is thus also negotiated by stakeholders around the organisation. No matter how well-meaning organisations may be, in environments where mistrust and rumours abound, they are highly liable to attract the reputation of being partisan, rendering them ineffective as a consequence. One of numerous examples is given in OECD (1997), where a peacebuilding radio programme was considered partisan because the accent of the actors identified them with one of the clans in the conflict. Such processes also took place in Sudan. Women's organisations considered single ethnic by outsiders could hardly operate convincingly as peacebuilders. The New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) constantly faced complications because some outsiders deemed this organisation to be too close to the rebel movement. The decentredness of organisations urges possible supporting organisations to look beyond the contacts with management representatives, and move into questions regarding the composition and perceptions of staff, and the images portrayed by the organisation to the outside world.

Organisations are political

Development policy often leans on the notion of civil society as value-driven and a-political. However, often contrary to their appearance, civil society organisations make ideological choices, and wittingly or unwittingly play political roles. International organisations working in conflict areas are usually well aware of this. As already noted, the question of whether organisations are associated with rebel movements is a constant concern. There are, however, also other political processes taking place. Much of what organisations do is inspired by and affects the power politics of internally and externally controlling and allocating resources, and the production of meaning, ideas and activities. This can be called the everyday politics of organisations (cf. Kerkvliet 1991: 11). At the same time, organisations are geared towards legitimisation. In the case of NGOs, this means that in order to find clients and supportive stakeholders, they have to convince others of their appropriateness and trustworthiness (cf. Bailey 1971). In our case, it could be said that while DPO assumed that SWVP was genuinely interested to expand its work inside southern Sudan, the SWVP was mainly playing the donor's tune, as NGOs often do.

The different kinds of politics intertwine in practice. When Sudanese NGOs accuse each other of political involvement, they are actually engaged in organisation politics to gain the upper hand in an NGO field competing for donors. It is important to realise that this politics operates in international organisations as much as in local ones. INGOs need to convince their back-donor of their trustworthiness, and back-donors need to convince their governments and the public at large that they spend their money in an effective and accountable way. The fact that many INGOs preferred to set up their own local groups rather than working through existing groups is an instance of legitimisation politics. INGOs, in order to enhance their legitimisation, often claim and aim to work in situations where they *initiate* organisation.

Recognising these different kinds of politics often helps in understanding seeming incongruencies in organisations. This can work in different ways. Often, in development situations, organisations tend to ignore the (ideological) political roles that NGOs play. In conflict situations, on the other hand, international organisations tend to overplay the importance of this kind of politics, falsely assuming that all organisation politics and legitimisation strategies stem from political difference around the conflict.

Although these five points can be generally applied to any organisation, they are especially pertinent for peacebuilding organisations. Capacity

building in (post-)conflict situations is a particularly complicated process, because conflict often erodes civil society organisations, and because of the difficulties of working in extremely resource-poor environments (Harvey 1998). Another complication is found in the complex field of actors that emerges in conflict situations, both within the area and because of the influx of intervening international agencies. Finally, conflict or transition situations lead to a lot of insecurity, where people have to respond to unknown events and much of their knowledge is based not on experience but on political manipulation and rumour.



What is the point of supporting civil society, in particular women's groups, to enhance peace in Sudan? When we look at the formal peacebuilding processes of IGAD, we see that NGOs have very restricted access to national or international negotiations. The limited role of women in peacebuilding is bound up with the space for women to participate in public affairs. In many cases, cultural impediments and prejudices to women's political participation still prevail. Women are ignored or simply 'forgotten'. Although the involvement of women in the official peace process is slowly improving, mainly as the result of external interventions such as the Engendering the Peace project, most attention for the role of women in peace is geared to their potential to forge peace at local level.

As elaborated in the paper, we concur with the position that it is crucial to support local (civil society) institutions that can make a difference by resolving frictions without resorting to violence. Strengthening local capacities for peace is crucial because, in the first place, higher-level conflict is always manifested locally in specific conflicts that need to be resolved on the ground. In the second place, once peace is established and international organisations withdraw from the scene, one needs resilient local institutions that can absorb, alter or resolve future tensions. Now that Sudan has entered a transition towards peace, such support is possibly even more important, given the increased tensions that may be expected once refugees start to return home, and the intensified resource competition that will result from renewed development interventions.

However, it is not enough to blindly advocate building local capacities for peace. Local-level peacebuilding should be grounded in the empirical analysis of social and organisational processes. The paper has presented a case of an INGO-supported Sudanese peace programme that turned into a frustrating process, because of misgivings about the nature of

the organisations involved. When the Sudanese organisation did not live up to its promises, the Dutch agency (pressurised by its back-donor) tried hard but was powerless to get the project delivered as envisaged. The Sudanese organisation felt increasingly abandoned by the INGO that showed little appreciation for its work. Most importantly, the project largely failed. No wonder, perhaps, that many international organisations shy away from these activities in southern Sudan, yet such a response is unfortunate. In the long term, bypassing or ignoring local capacities is simply no option when working on peacebuilding. When international organisations are serious about peacebuilding, they have to make more effort to analyse the capacities of local organisations, to search for gems among the rubble, and to sit down with organisations to dialogue about the alleged problems. Moreover, in the case presented, the problems that occurred were partly induced by the donor agency that projected its ambitions and views onto a local organisation. Taking capacity building seriously will thus also require international organisations to reflect on the extent to which problems are related to their own culture and practices.

On the donor side, much of what went wrong in the project was because the donor knew everything about conflicts in Sudan, but very little about the nature of organisations. Peacebuilding is done by people, and the dynamics in their organisation are crucial for the success of programmes. In this paper, we have forwarded a process approach to peace organisations. Such an approach focuses on the question of how actors in and around organisations give meaning to an organisation. A process approach brings out five main properties of organisations:

- Organisations are the outcome of their own social, individual and institutional history, as well as their national, historical and cultural context.
- Organisations constitute social networks that often stretch beyond their confines.
- Organisations consist of different realities and discourses that are used strategically to manage relations, including relations with donors.
- The meaning of an organisation results from everyday negotiations of staffmembers and stakeholders.
- Organisations are fundamentally political in nature; peace organisations are not just involved in the politics of peace and conflict, but as much in everyday politics of the production of *meaning* and the *reallocation of resources* and in the politics of *legitimation* of their organisation *vis-à-vis* other stakeholders.

Organisations, then, appear as entities which a bewildering numbers of stories can be told about. Yet, there are a number of different practical implications of a process approach to organisations.

- Organisation dynamics will not be unfolded by reading their reports, talking with the director, or organising a single participatory workshop. Grasping the organisational dynamics of peacebuilding needs a more in-depth or even ethnographic methodology, which can best be achieved through co-ordinated research efforts commissioned by the different international organisations with a presence in the area.
- Adopting a process approach means accepting that there is no single truth about organisations, but that insights depend on particular interpretations. Methodologies for assessment, implementation and evaluation must be adjusted to this insight and rely more on multi-stakeholder dialogue than on so-called expert knowledge.
- International organisations interested in capacity building of local peace organisations must develop more sensitivity to the multiplicity of discourses, and in particular pay attention to the informal aspects of organisations and the perceptions of different staff (not just the management).
- International organisations have to realise that capacity building of local organisations is a long-term process that needs serious commitment. This is especially the case in conflict and post-conflict situations, where civil society tends to break down. The depletion of local resources, a lack of organisational capacities, and the environment of suspicion in which civil society organisations have to grow, makes organisation building in such situations complicated.
- International organisations must be cautious in the kind of support they extend to local peacebuilding processes. Supporting peacebuilding requires recognising and respecting indigenous notions, processes and time frames for organisational development.

NOTES

1. For the history of the interest in civil society and peacebuilding, see Duffield 2001, Frerks *et al.* 1999, Frerks 2001, Harvey 1998, Macrae 2001.

2. Perhaps more important than changing characteristics of conflict is that policy discourse around conflict and peace has changed. Some even argue that there has been no real change, since the majority of conflicts since the Second World War were similar in nature but remained in the shadow of the dominant East–West conflict (Holsti 1996: 37).

3. We wish to thank Stichting Hotel de Wereld and Pax Christi for their support in making the research possible.

4. Major churches in Sudan are the Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church.

5. Inventory of the Sudan Ecumenical Forum, 2001.

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