Keeping Hope Alive

Christian Aid’s work on peace

Case Study: South Sudan
Christian Aid exists to create a world where everyone can live a full life, free from poverty.

Poverty is an outrage against humanity. It robs people of their dignity and lets injustice thrive. But together we have the power to transform lives.

We are a global movement of people, churches and local organisations who passionately champion dignity, equality and justice in 37 countries worldwide. We are the changemakers, the peacemakers, the mighty of heart.

We provide urgent, practical help in times of crisis and beyond. We seek to eradicate extreme poverty by tackling its root causes. Together with people living in poverty, we amplify our voices to speak truth to power and create lasting change.

Everyone is equal in the sight of God. For over 70 years this has inspired us to stand together in solidarity with our global neighbours, of all faiths and none.

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Violence and peacebuilding in South Sudan

South Sudan has been torn apart by violence since the current civil war broke out in 2013. Overlapping conflicts over resources, power and identity have undermined people’s ability to feed themselves and created widespread hunger, displaced whole communities and weakened basic services, and militarised politics and politicised ethnicity.

Local and international efforts for peace began immediately. In 2015, warring parties signed the Agreement for the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), which made it possible for a Transitional Government of National Unity to be established in 2016. Optimism faded fast as this government all but collapsed four months later when an outbreak of violence in the capital forced key signatories to flee the country, creating the conditions for a widening new conflict. A revitalised ARCSS was signed in September 2018, the least violent year since December 2013. However, conflict has deepened along many fragmented front lines and the revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity has yet to be established.

The role of churches in building peace

South Sudan’s churches have built on the country’s traditions of mediation and consensus in an attempt to deal with the extreme violence of the modern era. The South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC), established in 2013, has set up its own peacebuilding mechanisms, putting itself at the forefront of the search for peace.

Conflicts at many different levels

South Sudan’s conflicts are multidimensional, protracted and unpredictable. They play out at many different levels: national, regional, local and familial. Conflicts arise over natural resources and feud killings – two kinds of existing conflict that have been aggravated by the national conflict. Community dialogue and representation are vital to reduce violence.

Below: Most of the families in Dong Boma village, Jonglei State, fled after being displaced by rebel soldiers. Now they are returning and Christian Aid is helping the villagers restart their lives with support for housing, livelihood, and food security.
Christian Aid’s peacebuilding work in South Sudan

Christian Aid relaunched its peacebuilding programme in South Sudan in 2015, though its partners have been working on peacebuilding for many years. At the time, many donors focused almost exclusively on the delivery of humanitarian aid. Our initial investment in peacebuilding at the height of a conflict led to wider work funded by other donors. From 2017, we significantly expanded our work with funds from other sources, including the UK Government.

To reduce the levels of violence, Christian Aid South Sudan and its partners are mainly working in two areas:

1. Supporting faith-based actors in the peace process.
2. Helping communities protect themselves from violence.

Supporting faith-based actors in the peace process

Christian Aid has worked with the SSCC to support its efforts from the national to the local level. The church recognised that its legacy as a peacemaker in South Sudan provided a great many lessons for the current situation, and that its credibility gave it a mandate to provide spiritual guidance and accompaniment to the political process. It was able to support the representation of marginalised citizens and accountability, which are necessary for South Sudan to reduce violence and move towards peace.

This work has been achieved through:

- Supporting advocacy, dialogue and reconciliation.
- Ensuring the participation of faith-based actors in peace negotiations.
- Providing financial resources, technical support and accompaniment.

Helping communities protect themselves from violence

Christian Aid and its partners have enabled local dialogue, addressing conflicts over natural resources and feud killings. In addition to working in communities devastated by the killings and sexual violence of the armed conflict, our partners have worked with local communities facing conflicts related to competition over fishing rights, pasture and water; addressing gender-based violence and disputes over bride wealth; and feuds.

This work has been achieved through:

- Providing local partners with financial and monitoring support.
- Giving training on conflict transformation, human rights and access to justice.
- Supporting the leadership of victims in justice processes.
- Drawing on international legal mechanisms and actors.
Our impact:

- The Action Plan for Peace was adopted by the SSCC in 2015. It is built around four pillars – advocacy, neutral forums, reconciliation and institutional capacity building.

- In subsequent years, the SSCC leadership visited international faith leaders and government representatives to build support for peace in South Sudan.

- In 2018, during the second phase of the High-Level Revitalisation Forum, the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development’s chief negotiator asked the SSCC to facilitate dialogue sessions to help the parties to bridge their differences over 10 critical outstanding governance and security issues. While the SSCC’s intervention was not enough to resolve the technical disagreements, it did create an environment conducive for genuine dialogue and convey the population’s desire for peace to decision makers, and raised issues of justice and accountability.

- With Christian Aid’s support, the SSCC continues to play a key role in the peace process throughout 2018 and 2019. The SSCC’s presence helps to build bridges between the parties, reminding them of their moral and spiritual duties, and brings out the issues of peace and accountability in the negotiations.

- In Bar Mayen, Northern Bahr al-Ghazal, Christian Aid’s partner Hope Agency for Relief and Development provides displaced communities rebuilding their lives with training on conflict transformation, human rights and access to justice, and trainees then teach others.

- In Nyal, Comboni missionaries work in a community devastated by the killings and sexual violence of the armed conflict. They provide counselling and mediation in cases of revenge killings caused by feuds. According to one missionary, the parish worked on the mediation of nine revenge killings in 2017, and six of the nine groups of people decided to give up the revenge cycle.

- Christian Aid influences key processes by promoting dialogue and reconciliation, and holds open a space for more authentic processes in the future.

- Christian Aid funds support frameworks and institutions for dialogue, allowing communities to address local conflicts over natural resources and feud killings.

‘The collective efforts of [the agencies involved in the Action Plan for Peace] helped the church to make great scores in local, regional and international advocacy. You can count the levels that they reached: the president’s office, the East African region, the US and other foreign governments, the Pope. All the power centres that matter in this conflict were met’

Person interviewed for study
Lessons learned

Christian Aid has adopted a flexible and long-term approach to programming in South Sudan. This approach was acknowledged by many people interviewed for this study. Our support for the churches’ role in the national peace process has made a real contribution to peace, partly because of our commitment to authentic processes of consultation and advocacy – a commitment summed up in our ‘accompaniment’ approach.

Building peace from a long, multidimensional conflict needs a mix of different approaches, and these need to be well orchestrated. Linking up the local and national was sometimes difficult. Donor impatience for results can undermine this complicated process.

Working with local church committees is a challenge and requires a long-term approach. The Action Plan for Peace directly addressed the need for local reconciliation and sought to create nationwide neutral forums in the peace negotiations, through its network of local inter-church committees (ICCs).

Getting the voices and interests of ICCs into the peace process is a challenge. Many ICCs in conflict areas had stopped work, since they last played an active role during the civil war with Sudan. Sometimes the church itself has been polarised by conflict and needs time to reflect. With the support of Christian Aid and its partners, the SSCC is re-establishing its network of Inter Church Committees (drawing on a similar model used in the past), which will facilitate communication between SSCC headquarters, regional offices and local churches.

South Sudan has powerful vernacular democratic traditions structured around kinship and ethnicity. These traditions may help the country to find a peaceful way out of its current crisis, but they are under threat from violence and militarisation. Supporting local democratic practices can help keep these values alive. In contrast to non-governmental organisations, the work of local churches is embedded more deeply in local communities and they do not close
down when funding runs out. They have relatively meagre resources, and they rely on the commitment of volunteers for many of their activities. The presence and commitment of church members gives churches legitimacy and authority.

Follow-up is vital. National peace agreements in South Sudan often fail in implementation, and local peacebuilding conferences and agreements make resolutions that are not followed up. This undermines the legitimacy of peacebuilding.

Christian Aid’s long-term approach and its principle of respectful partnership with national counterparts could help it to develop a more joined-up and followed-up approach to the difficult task of peace.

Below: A girl carries water in a camp on the edge of Juba, the capital of South Sudan.
Endnotes


2 In it for the long haul? Lessons on peacebuilding in South Sudan, Christian Aid, 2018,

3 The impact assessments are based on 27 interviews undertaken, cross-checked against news reports, programme literature and other documentation by the consultant.
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