

Localising humanitarian aid during armed conflict

Learning from the histories and creativity of South Sudanese NGOs

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Also supported by



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Development





Acknowledgements

This research and report were only possible because of the initiative, openness, funding and informed, critical thinking of members of the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) working in South Sudan. This report is rather unique in localisation discussions in being driven from offices in South Sudan and not offices in donor capitals. The DFID team in South Sudan must be credited with this initiative. The research was also made possible and carefully guided by the East Africa Research Hub.

Special thanks must also go to the two hundred people, including South Sudanese NGO founders, staff and volunteers, who gave over 300 hours of their time to inform this research. The research would not have been possible without their own interest and engagement despite the other demands on their time.

We also greatly appreciated the logistical support provided by the NGO Forum and Concern Worldwide. From The Research People, we are grateful for the support of Linda Ahimbisibwe and Fiona Mwenda, and, from the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa, for the help of Martha Geiger.

Finally, we would like to thank Professor David Keen and John Malish, as well as staff of DFID and their anonymous, external reviewer, for reviewing the report and providing valuable, critical feedback and for helping us appreciate the significance of these findings. Conversations with Brendan Tuttle and Hayley Umayam were also incredibly insightful and we are grateful for their collaborative, critical approach to understanding localisation in South Sudan.

This document is an output from a project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) through the Research for Evidence Division (RED) for the benefit of developing countries. However, the views expressed and information contained in it is not necessarily those of, or endorsed by DFID, which can accept no responsibility for such views or information or for any reliance placed on them.

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Acronyms

ACROSS	African Committee for the Rehabilitation of South Sudan	NNGO	National non-governmental organisation
CAR	Central African Republic	NSCC	New Sudan Council of Churches
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement	OLS	Operation Lifeline Sudan
CSO	Civil society organisation	PRDA	Presbyterian Relief and Development Agency
DFID	Department for International Development (UK)	RASS	Relief Association for South Sudan
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo	ROSS	Relief Organization for South Sudan
ELFSS	Evidence and Learning Facility South Sudan	RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
FGD	Focus group discussion	SINGO	Sudanese indigenous non-governmental organisation
GOSS	Government of South Sudan	SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
GOS	Government of Sudan	SPLA-IO	SPLA-in Opposition
HPF	Health Pooled Fund	SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan	SRRA	Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association
ICBP	Institution and capacity building programme	SSHF	South Sudan Humanitarian Fund
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross	SUNDE	Sudanese Network for Democratic Elections
IMC	International Medical Corps	TOR	Terms of reference
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation	UN	United Nations
KII	Key informant interview	UN OCHA	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
LINCS	Localizing Institutional Capacity in Sudan	WFP	World Food Programme
L/NNGO	Local/national non-governmental organisation	WHS	World Humanitarian Summit
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army		
NGO	Non-governmental organisation		



Executive summary

In contexts of armed conflict, international humanitarian organisations increasingly rely on local and national actors to deliver aid. South Sudan is no exception: while international organisations have worked with and through South Sudanese organisations for decades, the number of local and national NGOs involved in the South Sudanese humanitarian response has increased substantially since the outbreak of widespread armed conflict in 2013. The number of South Sudanese NGOs registered as members of the South Sudan NGO Forum has also grown, from 92 in 2012 to 263 in 2019. The proliferation of South Sudanese NGOs and their increasingly central role in the humanitarian response has been driven, in part, by the significant access constraints and risks associated with operating in South Sudan. International actors increasingly depend on South Sudanese NGOs to reach conflict-affected communities. These shifts are also taking place in the context of global commitments to 'localise' humanitarian response, with humanitarian organisations and donor governments committing to shift power and resources closer to affected populations.

South Sudan provides an opportunity for us to learn about the realities of implementing these localisation commitments in the context of protracted, complex crises, including armed conflicts. While there is a desire among many international organisations to localise humanitarian response, there are also concerns that the national NGO sector can be more easily captured by political interests that contradict humanitarian principles, and that humanitarian funds can be diverted to resource violent political economies. In South Sudan, violent conflict has been consistently driven by political structures in which claims on power can be

made through violence and loyalties can be bought with money. This raises questions over how national organisations (and humanitarian assistance more broadly) play into this marketplace of money and power.

This report moves beyond abstract assumptions and global-level debates to understand the reality of the struggles and strategies of local and national organisations during complex emergencies. We focus on the histories, politico-economic dynamics and everyday realities of South Sudanese NGOs during South Sudan's armed conflicts and intermittent periods of peace over the last four decades. We draw on consultations with over 200 people in six sites across South Sudan, including urban and rural areas, and sites controlled by rebel forces as well as sites controlled by the government. We consider South Sudanese NGOs' institutional development and funding sources, as well as the backgrounds and motivations of their founders and staff. The report focuses primarily on the perspectives and experiences of those working for local and national NGOs, as well as local communities, authorities and former staff, thus bringing these local perspectives to the global debate on localisation.

By starting from the perspective of South Sudan and drawing on detailed ethnographic and historical research in sites across South Sudan, this report is able to make a rare, locally informed contribution to these global debates. This allows us to see the everyday efforts and motivations of South Sudanese NGOs, as well as noticing the structural issues within the aid sector which elevate the risks they face and, over time, reproduce a lack of trust in South Sudanese NGOs.



The report makes the following key arguments:

a South Sudanese NGOs have expanded in waves during humanitarian crises. These waves of expansion have entrenched assumptions that South Sudanese NGOs should tolerate higher risks than their international counterparts.

NGOs became active in Southern Sudan from the 1970s, but the first significant expansion of South Sudanese NGOs came during the armed conflicts of the 1990s and in the context of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), a large-scale, multilateral humanitarian programme. With the return to widespread armed conflict in 2013, there was another shift towards funding for South Sudanese NGOs. On both occasions, difficult operating conditions in South Sudan, including insecurity and inaccessibility, often led international organisations to prioritise the safety of their own (international) staff. This meant reducing their presence in South Sudan and instead working through local partners. These commitments to staff safety can impede humanitarian commitments, so working through South Sudanese NGOs gave international organisations a way to mitigate risks while still responding to humanitarian needs. For some international organisations, working through local partners was also an ethical commitment and a way to improve the sustainability of the response.

This reliance on local and national NGOs to deliver aid in some of the most risky and remote locations raises profound ethical issues. A repeated distinction made by humanitarians between international and South Sudanese NGOs is that the latter have better access to conflict-affected communities and do not evacuate during times of crisis. Some South Sudanese NGOs use this claim as a means of legitimisation with communities and with donors. In practice, however, access varies significantly from organisation to organisation, and many different strategies may be deployed to navigate conflict and to stay safe when others have left. South Sudanese NGO staff take on significant risks to access and remain with affected communities in times of conflict.

Another factor is that South Sudanese NGOs are often the most accessible part of the aid structure for communities and local authorities. This is not only when INGOs evacuate, but also because of the Juba-centric nature of the aid system (discussed below). This increases the risks for South Sudanese NGOs, who may be held accountable locally for inconsistencies and shifts in funders' policies.

The expectation of different risk tolerance between South Sudanese and international organisations is believed by South Sudanese NGOs to be implicitly supported by donors, and there is a perception that donors are more willing to accept that INGOs need to protect their own staff. For example, INGOs usually successfully justify costly insurance for staff, as well as the necessity of evacuations, whereas many South Sudanese NGOs struggle to fund evacuations of their staff. These security risks are exacerbated when there are tacit or explicit expectations by donors and international organisations that South Sudanese NGOs will not claim funding for vehicles and insurance.

b Long-standing funding patterns (including short-term projects and underfunding of core costs) have consistently undermined the capacity of many South Sudanese NGOs. The increasing reliance on pre-financing has also made it more difficult for South Sudanese NGOs to establish a track record and prove themselves trustworthy. South Sudanese NGO founders have often made significant financial sacrifices to establish and sustain their organisations.

Drawing on literature from the 1990s and 2000s, this report shows that South Sudanese NGOs have faced similar funding challenges for many years. Funding is still frequently short term, prescriptive and project-specific, with few opportunities to invest in assets such as vehicles, offices or equipment. Intermittent and unpredictable funding, combined with implicit and explicit restrictions on staff salaries, make it difficult for South Sudanese NGOs to hire and retain experienced staff. This undermines the ability of South Sudanese NGOs to invest in their institutional capacity. While increases



in direct funding to South Sudanese NGOs might be welcome, what is just as important is the quality and flexibility of this funding and the ability to invest in institutional capacity. Internationally supported, short-term capacity-building workshops or interventions cannot compensate for the underfunding of core human resources of South Sudanese NGOs.

One significant change in recent years is that pre-financing requirements have become increasingly common. This produces additional challenges, forcing NGOs to make complex and potentially risky arrangements in order to fund work upfront. South Sudanese NGOs, unlike their international counterparts, are usually less able to draw upon organisational reserves or international, core funding sources to meet these demands, and so are forced to engage in creative, complex and opaque strategies to fund the work they are doing for donors. The intricacies and fragility of these arrangements increase financial and reputational risk for South Sudanese NGOs, making it almost impossible to establish themselves as financially transparent and trustworthy. Crucially, this means that donors' use of pre-financing helps to create the perception of South Sudanese NGOs as untrustworthy.

Many founders of South Sudanese NGOs invest significant amounts of resources and unpaid time into establishing and sustaining their organisations. Founders and directors often work unpaid while establishing the organisation or when it is struggling financially. Many also use their own resources to support the organisation: often this is money raised through working for international organisations, either as short-term consultants or in longer-term positions. Others draw on income from businesses.

This report also illuminates the various strategies deployed by South Sudanese NGOs to establish and sustain an organisation, maintain service provision and meet the needs of members, even when international funding is lacking. In particular, our research highlighted the extent to which the humanitarian response delivered through South Sudanese NGOs draws on voluntary labour. Staff frequently work

unpaid to sustain activities between projects, or with the hope or expectation of future salaried employment. South Sudanese NGOs also find many different ways to generate resources and operate without international funding, such as renting out meeting halls and guesthouse space, farming, or conducting activities that require little or no funding. Some support comes from churches and diaspora members.

Despite all this, most South Sudanese NGOs have a perpetual struggle for funding and continue to make sacrifices. Because they depend to a great extent on international funding to implement activities, particularly at a larger scale, they are under significant pressure to respond to the needs and priorities of donors. This can result in organisations shifting from one sector to another, or taking on new sectors and locations to access funding. While there are examples of NGOs turning down funding, this is typically only an option for larger organisations and is relatively rare.

c The founders and leaders of many of South Sudan's largest NGOs are often highly motivated, dynamic and charismatic individuals who often have significant experience of working for international organisations. At the same time, there are biases towards particular types of organisations: growing an NGO and accessing funding is much harder for organisations without a presence in Juba, women-led organisations and organisations whose focus is not on humanitarian response.

In the post-2013 complex emergency, NGO work has provided an outlet for people to seek change and to meet needs, as well as to make a living and build personal authority. Interviewees who had founded South Sudanese NGOs described various motivations for doing so (see Section 3). There is frequently a desire for organisations to become 'national', which is often associated with having a presence in the capital and operating in multiple locations. For many organisations, this aspiration is linked to a desire to promote a national identity and to avoid supporting only one community.



NGO founders play a key role in making their organisations more or less successful. However, this is not just about the characteristics of particular individuals: there are wider structural factors that allow some individuals to found and grow organisations more successfully than others. Many founders and key staff of large, well-funded organisations have experience of working with international organisations and of living and studying abroad. They are often well connected to, and skilled at engaging with, the international system. Sometimes they are also well connected politically at subnational and national levels. Often organisations rely on one well connected and driven founder. Notably South Sudanese founders are predominantly male, with the exception of a few well-connected women. However, the importance of founders can create challenges for leadership transitions, and there are numerous examples of major South Sudanese NGOs becoming dormant when their leaders became ill or moved into government positions.

d South Sudanese NGOs interact with national and local politics and power in complex and contingent ways, and it is too simplistic to assume that they have a higher propensity than INGOs to be polarised by wartime politics. The resources managed by NGOs – whether national or international – make them significant players in all local political economies across South Sudan. South Sudanese NGOs use a variety of strategies, often based on their detailed understanding of politics, to uphold humanitarian principles despite local and national politics. At the same time, the centralised nature of the aid sector in South Sudan perpetuates geographic inequalities, with access to funding often contingent on an organisation's profile and presence in Juba.

In complex emergencies, a key reservation about localisation has been the uncertainty about local humanitarian actors' relationships with warring parties and the political economy. The concern is that those embedded in the community will find it impossible not to be polarised by wartime politics. Our research highlights a much more complex interaction between South Sudanese NGOs and the political economy.

This report finds that the way the aid system engages with South Sudanese NGOs replicates and reinforces existing centre-periphery dynamics, meaning that many of those not located in the humanitarian centre of Juba feel a sense of marginalisation. This reflects broader political economy dynamics – and grievances – in South Sudan. Access to funding depends to a great extent on presence and visibility in Juba. Subnational organisations without a presence in the capital – even if they have long histories and established membership bases – struggle to access funding and recognition. This isolation has been exacerbated since the outbreak of conflict in 2013, because insecurity has rendered travel between towns increasingly difficult and the government has cut phone networks in some areas.

Meanwhile, South Sudanese organisations that are able to establish a significant presence both in Juba and in more isolated areas occupy a powerful role as brokers of resources, services, communications and employment opportunities. Large South Sudanese NGOs have often been credited by remote, rebel-held communities for keeping a link open to the administrative and financial centre of Juba.

Across much of South Sudan, and particularly in remote areas, NGO work currently provides the vast majority of salaried employment. Governed by strong norms of reciprocity and sharing, these salaries are often used to support extended kin networks. As a result, bringing employment and salaries into an area is often seen as the key impact of NGO work (both national and international), and founders and key staff of national NGOs often describe the employment they have provided as a key achievement.



South Sudanese NGOs (as well as INGOs) must tread a fine line between compromise with, and resistance to, the demands of political authorities. In South Sudan, many NGOs have budgets and assets that far surpass those of local government authorities, and almost all South Sudanese NGO workers currently earn much more than local government employees. South Sudanese NGO workers therefore often have significant public authority and this can be threatening to local governments. Local authority figures might try to mitigate this by controlling access to humanitarian resources. In response, NGOs will make use of humanitarian principles, as well as particular ways of talking, negotiating and explaining their work, to manage demands from authorities. NGOs also emphasise to authorities the need for services to continue and the risk that funding, and in turn, services, may be withdrawn by partners and donors if they violate these humanitarian principles.

Finally, the report highlights how South Sudanese NGOs have sometimes used being socially embedded to carve out the socio-political space to avoid political polarisation and act as humanitarians. South Sudanese NGOs, as all NGOs, often act as public authorities. The line between the aid sector and politics in South Sudan has been blurred by leaders moving between the two. However, these socially embedded realities in complex emergencies are complicated. While they can result in political co-option, realities are often much more complicated and humanitarian space can be created through local relationships and knowledge.

In addition to this report, a short policy paper has been written to provide targeted recommendations for donors in South Sudan.



1 Introduction

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) resulted in an array of commitments relating to 'localisation', following growing calls to shift resources and decision-making power to local and national humanitarian actors. The Grand Bargain, a set of global commitments to reform the humanitarian system – commits signatories to increase multi-year investment in the institutional capacities of local and national responders, and to channel 25 per cent of humanitarian funding to local and national responders 'as directly as possible' by 2020.¹ However, progress on Grand Bargain commitments globally has been limited by the breadth and scope of the commitments, tensions between commitments, a lack of practical methodologies for measuring progress and other issues.²

The localisation commitments have proved particularly contentious in contexts of armed conflict. Donors and international NGOs have struggled to know whether local and national NGOs can be trusted in an environment where conflicts have polarised people, and warring parties depend on capturing resources to fund the conflict. Donors and international NGOs (INGOs) have worried about local and national NGOs' (L/NNGOs) entanglement in wartime political economies, and their lack of will to prevent humanitarian resources being captured by the warring parties.³

However, there is a key oversight in discussions about whether L/NNGOs can be trusted: the failure to consider the role played by the aid sector and donors themselves in creating distrust and unpredictability. Short-term, pre-financing funding mechanisms and other norms of humanitarian aid can make this lack of trust a self-fulfilling prophecy. These funding norms have often persisted over decades and have entrenched the challenges that L/NNGOs face in establishing their legitimacy and trustworthiness, both with donors and communities. This report explores the mechanisms that have made trust-building by L/NNGOs difficult, and the strategies used by NGOs to build trust despite these challenges. These histories also help to highlight the creative strategies used by L/NNGOs to deliver humanitarian aid when funds and donor trust are limited.

In practice, humanitarian systems in contexts of conflict rely heavily on national humanitarians to deliver aid, including the staff of both L/NNGOs and INGOs. This report is interested in the implications for L/NNGOs of this redistribution of risk, and the systemic practical and moral shortcomings that result for the humanitarian system as a whole.

¹ For more information see <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

² Metcalfe-Hough, V., L. Poole, S. Bailey, and J. Belanger. 'Grand Bargain Annual Independent Report 2018'. Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, June 2018.

³ Schenkenberg, E. 'The Challenges of Localised Humanitarian Aid in Armed Conflict'. Emergency Gap Series 03, MSF, 2016.



This report explores these tensions through an in-depth study of the realities and histories of South Sudanese national non-governmental organisations (NNGOs). Humanitarian engagement in South Sudan has been shaped over five decades by political events and violent conflicts that have led to severe and protracted humanitarian crises. The NGO sector in South Sudan has its origins in international assistance for refugee returns to Southern Sudan in the 1970s, and it expanded during OLS and the humanitarian operations of the 1990s. The mid-1990s was a key period for the emergence and international funding of South Sudanese NGOs. In 2005 a peace agreement resulted in the creation of a nascent Government of Southern Sudan, and this reconfigured the South Sudanese NGO sector.

In December 2013, fighting between factions of the South Sudanese army in Juba prompted armed conflict elsewhere in South Sudan and the formation of an armed opposition. Over the last six years, the armed conflict has continually waxed and waned, and been geographically and economically reconfigured. The revitalised peace agreement in 2018 secured a reduction in hostilities, but it did not end all fighting, and has not reformed the underlying political system. The humanitarian situation in South Sudan remains dire, with 7.1 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and protection. Around 1.5 million of these live in areas where violent conflict and other access constraints make the provision of humanitarian assistance extremely difficult.⁴ The outbreak of violent conflict in 2013 and the subsequent shift in aid policies and practices in South Sudan has further expanded the role of South Sudanese NGOs.

At the same time, there has been limited progress in South Sudan towards Grand Bargain commitments. A review conducted by the Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) in 2018 found that in contexts such as South Sudan, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) was not pursuing localisation actively except by mechanisms such as pooled funds.⁵ Relatedly, a review of DFID's partnerships with civil society organisations (CSOs) found that strict requirements, time-consuming application processes and short-term, project-based funding "*limit the ability of CSO partners to ensure their relevance, health and adaptability*".⁶ Meanwhile, recent research conducted in South Sudan described a "*palpable sense of frustration among L/NNGO research participants about the lack of localisation by INGOs*".⁷ Another study estimated that, in 2017, South Sudanese NGOs *directly* received only 0.3 per cent of total funds given to the humanitarian crisis response. The combined total of both direct and indirect funding channelled to South Sudanese NGOs amounted to around 4.9 per cent of total funding.⁸

In South Sudan, the humanitarian sector as a whole has been blamed for contributing to predatory war-time economies and current, violent kleptocratic governments.⁹ This exemplifies a situation in which funders must pay attention to the way aid may be captured or manipulated by warring parties. Over the last five years, donors have been increasingly active about ensuring the conflict-sensitivity of their programming.¹⁰ At the same time, the danger with assuming corruption in any part of the aid sector is that we can easily ignore the complex motivations that prompt humanitarian action and

⁴ UN OCHA. 'South Sudan 2019 Humanitarian Response Plan (January–December 2019)'. December 2018.

⁵ Evans, A. 'The UK's Approach to Funding the UN Humanitarian System: A performance review'. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact, December 2018.

⁶ Fahm, T. 'DFID's Partnerships with Civil Society Organisations'. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact, April 2019.

⁷ CARE, Christian Aid, Tearfund, ActionAid, CAFOD, Oxfam. 'Accelerating Localisation through Partnerships: Recommendations for operational practices that strengthen the leadership of national and local actors in partnership-based humanitarian action in South Sudan'. February 2019. p11.

⁸ Ali, M., et al. 'Funding to Local Humanitarian Actors: South Sudan case study'. Humanitarian Policy Group, NEAR, Overseas Development Institute, October 2018.

⁹ De Waal, A. 'When Kleptocracy Becomes Insolvent: Brute causes of the civil war in South Sudan'. *African Affairs* 113, no. 452 (2014): 347–369.

¹⁰ The formation and use of the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility could be seen as indicative of this activity.



the intricate strategies that are used to navigate these difficult contexts. We can also miss the reality that South Sudanese NGOs may also provide opportunities to carve out an alternative, non-partisan, non-militarised space in which to establish an alternative authority.

This study was commissioned to help DFID and others to better understand local and national NGOs in the context of South Sudan, including their histories and how they connect to wider political economies, in order to inform strategies for engaging with and supporting the South Sudanese NGO sector. This initiative by DFID staff in South Sudan gives a rare, country-up perspective to these global debates on localisation.

1.1 Methodology and limitations

This study primarily adopted a qualitative, in-depth methodology including oral and life history and key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), observations and a literature review. The project was reviewed and approved by the LSE Research Ethics Committee. It was conducted by a 12-person research team, the majority of whom were South Sudanese. A more detailed description of the methodology can be found in Annex 1.

Primary data collection took place in Akobo, Ganyiel, Juba, Tochriak, Wau and Yambio between May and September 2019. This case-study approach with in-depth fieldwork allowed comparisons across geographic areas as well as across NGOs. These sites were chosen to allow comparisons across locations with different histories of war, politics and humanitarian aid, as well as a mixture of government- and opposition-held areas and larger and smaller population centres.

A total of 171 one-on-one interviews were carried out, including 105 life history interviews with participants from South Sudanese NGOs, and 66 KIIs with other participants including community leaders and members, and people from INGOs and UN agencies, local authorities, churches and the private sector. In addition, six FGDs were conducted, with 34 people in total. This brings the total number of people consulted, including all interviewees and focus group participants, to 205, of whom 54 were female. A breakdown of data collected by location and type (KII, life history, FGD) is detailed in Annex 1, Table 1, and a breakdown by location and gender is included in Annex 1, Table 2. Further details on the sampling methodology are also included in Annex 1.

Life history interviews were conducted with people working in a range of different positions for a wide range of South Sudanese NGOs. These NGOs varied in several ways including size, location, activities and when they were founded. The aim was to understand the individual's own life history and its intersection with the history of the organisation itself, as well as the organisation's current approach, activities and challenges. In order to build up detailed pictures of specific organisations, we interviewed multiple individuals from the same organisation as well people outside the organisation. These interviews were synthesised into detailed organisational histories.

To provide an external perspective on South Sudanese NGOs, we also conducted KIIs in each location with external actors. The aim was to deepen our understanding of both the historical development and contemporary characteristics of organisations in each area, along with the ways they engaged with and were perceived by other key actors. In addition, six FGDs were conducted, including two each in Ganyiel, Wau and Yambio. Finally, observations included a three-day peace conference in Wau partly organised by South Sudanese NGOs.



The majority of interviews and FGDs were recorded, translated (if not in English) and fully transcribed, except where recording was felt to be too sensitive; in these cases, detailed notes were taken. Interviews were conducted anonymously and the names of organisations are not included in this report. A preliminary analysis of data was undertaken as part of a mid-point review to identify gaps. Once all data had been collected, case studies were written for each site, analysing the data in relation to each of the research questions (see Annex 1). These case studies fed into a two-day group analysis workshop, conducted in Juba with the research team. In addition, validation and dissemination workshops were held in Ganyiel, Juba, Wau and Yambio, at which emerging findings were presented and discussed.

As outlined, our research intentionally focused on the accounts of South Sudanese NGO staff. These life histories are a rich source for understanding NGOs' priorities and visions, struggles and anxieties, and creative responses. At the same time, we were cognisant throughout the research and analysis of the positionality of these research participants. To account for this and to ensure we were hearing a range of perspectives, we sought to include participants from a wide range of backgrounds and locations, from different positions within organisations (including volunteers and former staff) and from a mixture of local, national and international organisations. We also gathered a research team with a diverse range of perspectives and experiences to support our critical, collective analysis of the data.

Recognising the significant work already undertaken in this area, the research also included a detailed review of academic and grey literature on South Sudanese NGOs and humanitarianism in South Sudan, and of relevant literature from other contexts, including a range of literature relating to localisation and the Grand Bargain. In total, 50 papers were reviewed. Annex 1 provides further details of the literature review, and a bibliography of identified literature is included in Annex 2.

Limitations

The research highlights the way that localities and specific contexts make a significant difference to the experiences and strategies of South Sudanese NGOs. However, the research only took place in certain case study sites, meaning we are limited in how far our conclusions can be generalised across (and beyond) South Sudan. The sensitive context in South Sudan also limited our access to government actors and to certain topics. There are anecdotal stories of corruption and other abuses circulating (though these are not necessarily specific to South Sudanese organisations), including reports of South Sudanese NGOs being asked to pay 'facilitation fees' to staff of international organisations in order to secure funding. However, it was not possible to verify such reports.¹¹

¹¹ Similar accusations have been reported through Devex. See Mednick, S. 'South Sudan Aid Sector "infected" with Bribery, Local NGOs Say'. Devex, 6 May 2019.



Although we intentionally developed a research team that could access a broad spectrum of interviewees, there were still certain groups that were less interviewed. We consciously sought to include women in the research, and particularly women-led organisations, but the majority of participants were male (151 of 205 participants). This partly reflects the significant gender imbalance in the NGO sector, especially at the highest levels of organisations. Nonetheless this is an important limitation to the study. Furthermore, aside from a small number of focus group discussions, community perspectives were not well represented and the data does not allow us to make statements about how community members perceive local and national NGOs. These would be important areas for further research.

It is also important to highlight that while the focus of this research was on NGOs, NGOs are in many ways the tip of the iceberg in terms of the ways in which people in South Sudan survive and support one another in times of crisis. For example, support provided through kinship networks and livelihood-based support groups, including fisherfolk, cattle keepers and traders, plays a crucial role in local coping mechanisms.¹²

1.2 Outline of report

Following this introduction, Section 2 of this report grapples with different categorisations of NGOs in South Sudan including 'local' and 'national'. We highlight the blurred boundaries of these categories, as well as people's use of certain categories to articulate their visions of humanitarianism and of their national, South Sudanese citizenship. Section 2 then discusses the histories of the South Sudanese NGO sector nationally and as experienced in specific localities. These micro-histories of the South Sudanese NGO sector in Akobo, Ganyiel, Wau and Yambio highlight the context-specific histories and political economies of South Sudanese NGOs.

It becomes clear that South Sudanese NGOs' geographic, social and political remoteness from the current humanitarian centre of Juba makes a significant difference to the sector. Away from the centre, NGOs struggled to build relationships and trust with the Juba-centric humanitarian system. However, these South Sudanese NGOs gained legitimacy locally through the links they were able to provide to the centre.

Section 3 discusses the institutional histories of South Sudanese NGOs. We notice that many of the founders of South Sudanese NGOs, particularly larger national organisations, have many years' experience working for international agencies. This section also demonstrates that to succeed as a South Sudanese NGO involves significant initial investment of social and economic capital. Founders use money earned working for international NGOs or for private businesses, as well as drawing upon social connections with INGOs and donors. These pre-existing connections make a big difference to an NGO's chances of survival, making certain types of NGOs more likely to succeed. Many founders also invest significant amounts of money to establish the organisation, so financial risks are high.

Section 4 goes on to discuss funding environments, and the risks and challenges these present to South Sudanese NGOs. A striking part of the findings in Section 4 is the use of creative strategies to find non-donor funding sources. To manage funding shortfalls and gaps between projects without becoming dormant, organisations rent out buildings, furniture and equipment and ask staff to work voluntarily. South Sudanese NGOs do grow through donor and INGO support, but challenging funding mechanisms make it difficult to build capacity and trust, and increase risks. Pre-financing requirements – asking NGOs to fund the work in advance of donor payments – produce additional

¹² Humphrey, A., V. Krishnan, and R. Krystalli. 'The Currency of Connections: Why local support systems are integral to helping people recover in South Sudan.' Mercy Corps, 2019.



challenges: while reducing risks to donors, they force NGOs to make complex and potentially risky funding arrangements. To meet these requirements, NGOs may borrow money from private businesses, other aid grants or, in the case of international NGOs, international headquarters often in the USA and Europe. Unexpected delays in delivery or payment (often because of situations outside of an NGO's control) complicate these precarious and fragile arrangements. Funding practices also increase safety risks – for example, donors' reluctance to fund costs, such as cars and evacuation flights, that could help keep South Sudanese NGO workers safe.

Section 5 draws the report to a close by directly discussing the South Sudanese NGOs' relationships to the realities of their political-economic environments, including national and local political economies. The section considers the realities of NGOs as public authorities, and the local political complexities that arise from the inequity of financial and

symbolic resources between NGOs (including South Sudanese NGOs) and local government authorities. The section highlights this as a prevalent political dynamic that is more central to everyday strategies than the polarised politics of warring parties. Because NGO staff salaries are a significant part of many local economies, these salaries become key battle grounds not just as a resource but as a way to establish authority. Not all South Sudanese NGOs are locally embedded in the areas where they work – in some cases they have relationships with communities and governing authorities that are more akin to those of INGOs – but for those that are, they can use this social embedding to navigate the space to uphold humanitarian principles.

The report concludes (Section 6) by drawing out conclusions and broad recommendations for future donor and INGO engagement with South Sudanese NGOs, as well as suggesting areas for future research. An accompanying policy brief provides further recommendations.



2 Historical and geographic dynamics of South Sudanese NGOs

2.1 What is a 'national' or 'local' NGO in South Sudan?

Humanitarian policy discourses have long emphasised the need to engage with national and subnational actors.¹³ However, there are a large variety of organisations with different histories, motivations and activities that are variously described as 'indigenous', 'local' and 'national'. The question of precisely who are 'local actors' has become increasingly fractious in light of the Grand Bargain and among those urging for – or nervous about – funding flow reforms. The national NGOs and other organisations already linked into the humanitarian sector are often the easiest to identify (and form the basis of this research). However, it is usually ordinary citizens and affected populations who are the first on the scene in the outbreak of an emergency or disaster. The 2015 World Development Report presented a broader definition of local aid workers to include charities, civil society groups, faith based organisations, volunteer groups and the private sector.¹⁴ The ongoing crisis in Syria has further necessitated broadening the definition to avoid it being bounded by geography as the distinction between 'local' and 'diaspora' has blurred.¹⁵

Moreover, the terms 'national' and 'local' are highly contextual and contested. In South Sudanese legislation and Juba-level policy discussions, 'national' is often shorthand for those organisations that are registered in Juba, while 'local' describes organisations registered and/or operating at a subnational level. However, this 'local', 'national' and 'international' distinction is blurred. In one exceptional circumstance, an international organisation that has been training community health workers in the same village for more than twenty years, and that consistently maintained a presence over these decades even during conflict, had gained a prominent place in the local infrastructure of the community and become part of their local history. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, some religious networks, and organisations founded by people in the diaspora, also blur lines between national and international.¹⁶ Several South Sudanese organisations aspire to become international.

'Indigenous NGOs' was another important category. In the 1990s, the first southern Sudanese NGOs to gain significant donor funding were described as indigenous. Interviewees during this research often used the term to distinguish between NGOs that were led, founded or managed in a specific locality, and others (whether international or national) that had their 'home' elsewhere.

¹³ Wall, I., with K. Hedlund. 'Localisation and locally-led crisis response: A literature review'. Local to Global Protection, May 2016.

¹⁴ Cited in Wall and Hedlund, 2016.

¹⁵ Svoboda, E., and S. Pantuliano. 'International and Local/Diaspora Actors in the Syria Response: A diverging set of systems?' Humanitarian Practice Group/Overseas Development Institute, March 2015.

¹⁶ Tanner, L. et al. 'Humanitarian Knowledge Landscape Report'. Humanitarian Leadership Academy, 2016.



For example, one large national NGO founded in Akobo was considered indigenous while smaller national NGOs founded elsewhere but operating in Akobo were not.

At the same time, all these categories are laden with ideas of identity and belonging that can be politically sensitive. 'Localisation', for example, is a word rejected by some South Sudanese as being 'local' is associated with being parochial and primarily tied to ethnic, local identities, as opposed to the national, South Sudanese identity. 'Indigenous' was popular in the case study sites as it seemed to entrench people's social obligations to their own community. However, these social obligations, and the attached sense of statically belonging to a specific community, have also been used to mobilise people to engage in armed violence.

Even 'NGO' can have different meanings. The term NGO came into use at the formation of the UN in 1945 as a way of distinguishing between UN agencies and other 'non-governmental' and non 'criminal' actors. Among our interviewees, the term was often used to describe organisations that bring resources from outside the country or state and that are generally engaged in the international humanitarian system.

For the purposes of this report, we use the term 'South Sudanese NGO' to refer primarily to registered NGOs founded by South Sudanese people and headquartered in South Sudan (whether 'local' or 'national'). Where relevant, we distinguish between national organisations operating in multiple locations and organisations based in one particular locality. Another important distinction is between those with and without a presence in Juba. We seek to be specific about these distinctions in the text.

2.2 National histories

The South Sudanese NGO sector has been shaped by historical events, conflict dynamics and the shifting policies and practices of the international humanitarian system. During the wars of the 1960s and early 1970s, church organisations were active in providing aid in southern Sudan. At the time of the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement, NGOs were rising in size and influence globally, and they became actively involved in the post-war return and rehabilitation of refugees to South Sudan. These NGOs were predominantly international organisations. Yet, even in the 1970s, some of these NGOs prioritised 'local' connections. For example, the African Committee for the Rehabilitation of South Sudan (ACROSS) was formed in 1972 by four international mission societies.¹⁷ Although they had international founders their explicit intention was to work through the local church, and they call themselves 'local'.¹⁸

The first wave of rapid expansion of the South Sudanese NGO sector took place in the early 1990s, in the context of OLS.¹⁹ This was facilitated, in part, by the internationally driven liberalisation of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), which began to establish civic structures and, in 1993, allowed the formation of the first, formal southern Sudanese NGO.²⁰ The New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) also played a significant role in coordinating and brokering relationships between donors, the SPLM/A and new southern Sudanese NGOs. Many of the larger, new southern Sudanese NGOs had offices in the All Africa Conference of Churches building in Nairobi, highlighting the importance of the relationship between these new NGOs and the NSCC. Yet the most important development was that international

¹⁷ It was later renamed as Association of Christian Resource Organizations Serving Sudan.

¹⁸ ACROSS history, <https://across-ssd.org/across-background/>

¹⁹ OLS was a large-scale, multilateral humanitarian programme which began in 1989 during Sudan's second civil war and lasted for sixteen years.

²⁰ Rolandsen, Ø. 'Guerrilla Government: political changes in the Southern Sudan during the 1990s'. Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2005.



humanitarian organisations began to actively seek out, encourage the formation of, and fund southern Sudanese NGOs, and to initiate formal 'capacity building' activities. This was partly fuelled by insecurity and inaccessibility within southern Sudan, which led international organisations to reduce the numbers of international staff and work through local partners instead.²¹ Other factors included the shift from 'relief' to 'development' within OLS, and a desire to circumvent the military and deal instead with local civil structures.²² Concerns about the politicisation of aid and the proximity of international organisations to the SPLM/A helped encourage a shift towards support for newly formed southern Sudanese NGOs.

Studies from the 1990s suggest that the early southern Sudanese NGOs were dependent upon and significantly shaped by international funding.²³ They were primarily subcontractors and service-delivery organisations, carrying out activities that donors were willing to fund.²⁴ At the same time, they also represented an outlet for political expression: a 1995 paper noted that the humanitarian space *"offered a measure of protection to Southerners who have wanted to air dissenting opinions"*.²⁵ Some were formed by southern Sudanese who wanted another route to support southern Sudan without fully committing to the armed operations of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).²⁶ However, the warring parties still maintained control over the southern Sudanese NGOs that were active in their area.

In 2002 the Machakos Protocol was signed, leading to the 2005 signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the SPLA and Government of Sudan (GOS). With the new anticipation of peace, donor agendas started to shift. Following the CPA, the number of INGOs in South Sudan increased significantly, from approximately 47 in 2005 to 155 in 2010.²⁷ Conventional wisdom suggested that lack of development was a major cause of conflict, so there was an emphasis on creating a 'peace dividend' through development, service delivery and state-building.²⁸ Yet this change in emphasis posed problems for some South Sudanese NGOs. With the shift to development, donors requested larger numbers of multi-million, multi-year programmes, but most South Sudanese NGOs did not have the experience or capacity to manage these grants. In addition, a key part of the CPA's development vision was the formation of the nascent Government of Southern Sudan so South Sudanese capacity building through the NGO sector was no longer the priority, as donors prioritised the building of a functioning government.²⁹ This involved significant investment at the Juba level, and the expectation that all NGOs would work in coordination with the state and local government authorities. At the same time, the creation of the new Government of Southern Sudan saw the first, large movement of South Sudanese NGO leaders into government posts;³⁰ former NGO directors became politicians at national or subnational levels

²¹ Rolandsen, 'Guerrilla Government'.

²² Karim, A., et al. 'Operation Lifeline Sudan: A review'. United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs, 1996. P100.

²³ Karim, A., et al. 'Operation Lifeline Sudan: A review'. United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs, 1996. P100.

²⁴ Rolandsen, 'Guerrilla Government'.

²⁵ African Rights, 'Imposing Empowerment'. p38

²⁶ De Waal, A. Food and Power in Sudan: A Critique of Humanitarianism, African Rights, 1997 pp.326-334.

²⁷ Felix da Costa, D. 'Working in Challenging Environments: Risk management and aid culture in South Sudan'. December 2012.

²⁸ Sørbo, G.M., M. Schomerus, L. Aalen. 'Country evaluation brief: South Sudan'. NORAD and Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), 2016

²⁹ Fenton, W., S. Pantuliano, J. te Velde. 'Fragile Relationships: Building a strong and resilient civil society in South Sudan'. PSO and HPG, 2012.

³⁰ Brandstetter, R., et al. 'Southern Sudan and the Three Areas: Civic participation assessment'. Management Systems International, 28 October 2010.



or became civil servants. Some prominent NGOs collapsed when their founders shifted into government. This period also saw a geographic shift of the headquarters of many South Sudanese NGOs from Nairobi to Juba, which became the 'centre' for the humanitarian system in South Sudan. This period saw a huge rise in the cost of land and buildings, increasing the barriers to entry for South Sudanese organisations trying to establish a presence in the capital.

The post-CPA period also saw new support for CSOs as donors sought to increase civic space and to build a democratic state.³¹ One example, and one of the largest support programmes, was the USAID-funded Mercy Corps' 'Localizing Institutional Capacity in Sudan' (LINCS) programme, which began in 2005 and lasted for six years.³² LINCS supported over a hundred CSOs in Southern Sudan, but was costly and had limited sustainability beyond the lifespan of the project.³³ Several interviewees for this report narrated a growing trend towards political activism around the time of the 2010 elections, the referendum and South Sudan's independence. For example, many organisations came together under the umbrella of the Sudanese Network for Democratic Elections (SUNDE), supported by the National Democratic Institute, which was very active in voter registration, education and monitoring activities around the 2010 elections.³⁴ However, reports from the time continued to highlight weak local ownership and the dependence of South Sudanese CSOs on external donor funding.³⁵ Many

organisations founded as part of international programmes to support civil society struggled to survive once the programme ended.

The conflict which erupted in December 2013 had deep repercussions for the NGO sector in South Sudan. The return to widespread conflict catalysed a dramatic shift in international funding, from development and state-building to humanitarian relief; by 2014, 67 per cent of aid to South Sudan was categorised as humanitarian.³⁶ Numerous activities aimed at strengthening civil society were halted, and funding for service delivery and development in areas not directly affected by the conflict was also reduced.³⁷ In the absence of reliable government salaries, many people shifted from government positions into NGOs.

These changes influenced South Sudanese NGOs in very different ways: for some it led to rapid growth, while others shrank or became dormant. Organisations working broadly in areas of development, justice, governance or human rights had to quickly shift their focus to emergency relief in order to access funding. Some organisations had their existing funding terminated prematurely. Some intentionally resisted donor pressure to change focus but struggled to attract funding. Other organisations struggled with the increased barriers to operation, such as the cutting of phone networks in certain areas. The inaccessibility of roads and reliance on air travel increased their running costs and their ability to connect to current or potential donors became limited. This led some organisations to shrink significantly. On the other hand,

³¹ Erickson, J., and C. Faria. "We Want Empowerment for Our Women": Transnational feminism, neoliberal citizenship, and the gendering of women's political subjectivity in postconflict South Sudan'. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 3 (1 March 2011): 627–652.

³² Gorjin, M. 'Southern Sudan: Rights and Responsibilities for Good Governance'. Mercy Corps, n.d.

³³ Brandstetter et al., 'Southern Sudan and the Three Areas.'

³⁴ Brandstetter et al., 'Southern Sudan and the Three Areas.'

³⁵ See, for example, Fenton, et al, 'Fragile Relationships'; Luedke, A.E., and H.F. Logan. "That Thing of Human Rights": Discourse, emergency assistance, and sexual violence in South Sudan's current civil war'. *Disasters* 42, no. S1 (1 January 2018); Sørbo, Schomerus, and Aalen, 'Country Evaluation Brief'.

³⁶ OECD 2016, in Sørbo, Schomerus, and Aalen, 'Country Evaluation Brief'.

³⁷ Maxwell, D., M. Santschi, L. Moro, R. Gordon, and P. Dau. 'Questions and Challenges Raised by a Large-Scale Humanitarian Operation in South Sudan'. Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, ODI, Swiss Peace and Feinstein International Center, May 2015.



the outbreak of conflict in December 2013 was a turning point for several large national South Sudanese NGOs, particularly those with a presence in opposition-held areas that were difficult for international organisations to access. By stepping in when international organisations evacuated, and by helping to expand the reach of the response, several national NGOs were able to prove themselves and quickly began accessing large-scale funding. The overall number of South Sudanese NGOs included in the humanitarian response also grew significantly during this time; for example, the number of South Sudanese NGOs included in the UN-led HRP increased from 40 in 2016³⁸ to 143 in 2020.³⁹ The number of South Sudanese NGOs registered with the South Sudan NGO Forum also increased, from 74 in 2011 to 242 in 2015⁴⁰ and 263 in 2019.

While the history of the South Sudanese NGO sector includes periods of significant and rapid change and adaption, funding challenges have remained relatively consistent. South Sudanese NGOs have often only been able to gain short-term, unreliable funding, which makes it hard for them to build their capacity. Strikingly similar critiques are also found in literature from a decade ago. For example, a review of donor support for conflict prevention and peacebuilding in South Sudan written in 2010 states that:

“The short-term nature of many interventions ... reduces the opportunity for capacity building. NGOs find themselves being drawn from one project to another without being able to build up core skills or clarify their actual intentions. They engage in short bursts of activity rather than a sustained presence in particular localities ... Donors have been reluctant to provide capital inputs such as vehicles and office equipment for Sudanese NGOs. Instead they may support ‘capacity building’ through short trainings. This limited commitment has left international non-government organisations (INGOs) arguing that the lack of capacity among Sudanese NGOs is a justification for their continued presence. Sudanese NGOs argue that ‘capacity is money’. Capacity comes through having the means to invest in staff, transport and to run an office.”⁴¹

This situation has been made worse in recent years by donor pressures to ensure value for money. The new norm of pre-financing is discussed further in Section 4.

³⁸ UN OCHA. ‘South Sudan 2016 Humanitarian Response Plan (January–December 2016)’. 31 December 2015.

³⁹ UN OCHA. ‘South Sudan 2020 Humanitarian Response Plan’. December 2019.

⁴⁰ South Sudan NGO Forum. ‘2015 South Sudan NGO Forum Annual Report’. February 2016.

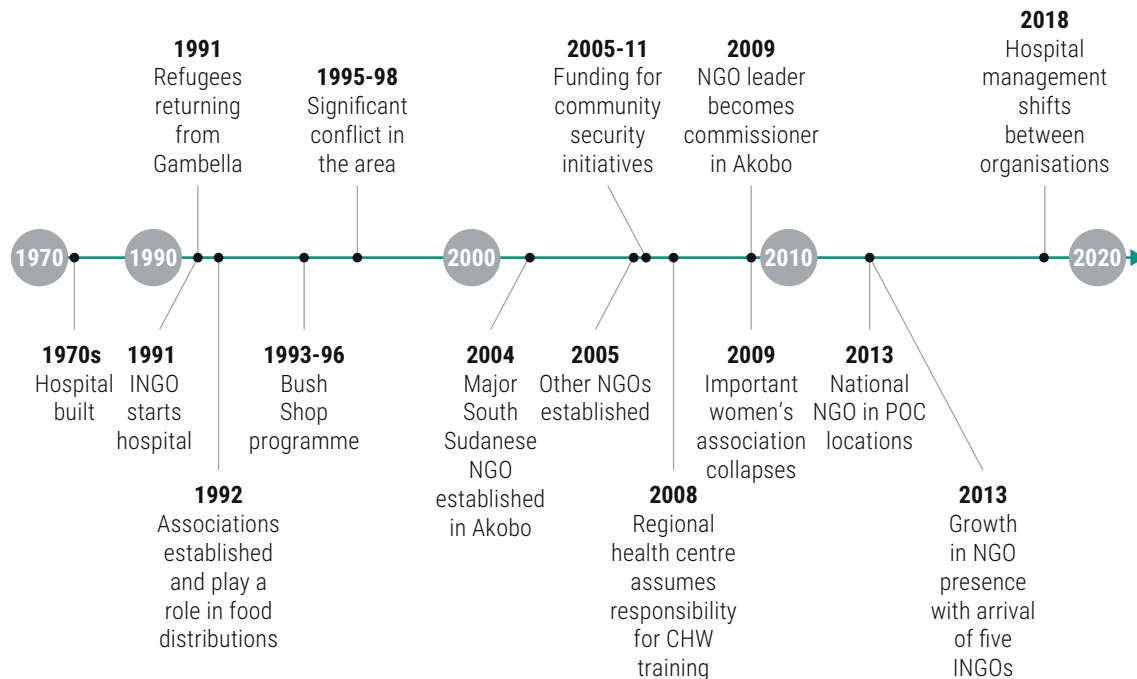
⁴¹ Bennett, J., et al. ‘Aiding the Peace: A multi-donor evaluation of support to conflict prevention and peacebuilding activities in Southern Sudan 2005–2010’. Overseas Development Institute, December 2010.



2.3 Case study histories

The experiences and histories of South Sudanese NGOs vary widely between different locations. Our case study sites had different histories of conflict, of aid interventions and experiences of NGO activity, as well as having different political economies and local public authorities. The following case study histories illustrate this diversity.

2.3.1 Akobo



Akobo is an administrative centre towards the Ethiopian border, to the far east of the Sudd flood plains. NGOs and the international aid operation have been a critical component of Akobo's history, and it has become a regional centre for NGO activity. The hospital has been a particular epicentre and symbol of humanitarian activity as it is a centre for health provision over a vast area. Built in the 1970s by the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC), it was formally opened by Medair in 1991. Since then it has changed hands at least seven times, as Medair, ACROSS, MSF Belgium, Presbyterian Relief and Development Agency (PRDA), International Medical Corps (IMC) and International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have scaled up their operations, moved or been removed, and scaled down.

Akobo became a centre for humanitarian aid when refugees and rebel soldiers returned from Ethiopia to South Sudan in 1991. During OLS, Akobo was prone to conflict and serious violence, meaning that humanitarian aid was largely delivered through INGO remote teams. This provided opportunities for local associations and the establishment of L/NGOs with a permanent presence on the ground. After the CPA, as the situation stabilised, the international NGO presence grew significantly. Akobo also became an important focus for local level peacebuilding and disarmament, and this provided opportunities for smaller, highly localised NGOs (often referred to as 'associations') to attract resources. Nevertheless, the NGO presence in Akobo had begun to decline prior to the outbreak of violence in December 2013. This quickly changed after December 2013, as Akobo became an SPLA-in Opposition (SPLA-IO) stronghold and an access point for the



international community to IO territory. There are now 15 NGOs operating in the town, representing a significant proportion of all regular salaried employment and a large portion of Akobo's economic activity. One INGO suggested they bring tens of thousands of US dollars in foreign currency every month to pay salaries.

Although various South Sudanese NGOs have been active in Akobo over different periods, there is only one with any significant longevity, scale and presence. This organisation was founded by individuals from Akobo living in Nairobi in the early 2000s, in response to the withdrawal of international NGOs from Akobo. It had a coordination office in Nairobi and then, after 2006, in Juba, but maintained its headquarters in Akobo. After the CPA, as NGOs began to return to Akobo, this South Sudanese NGO provided accommodation in its compound to many visiting international agencies. This allowed it to raise an income and build networks in the aid sector. The organisation has grown rapidly since 2013 because of its presence in remote, inaccessible areas of South Sudan where INGOs were reluctant to operate, and it is now a national enterprise. This large NGO has played an important role in the histories of many other, smaller organisations also based in Akobo that operate at a national level, with offices in Juba, either through providing staff experience or through logistical support.

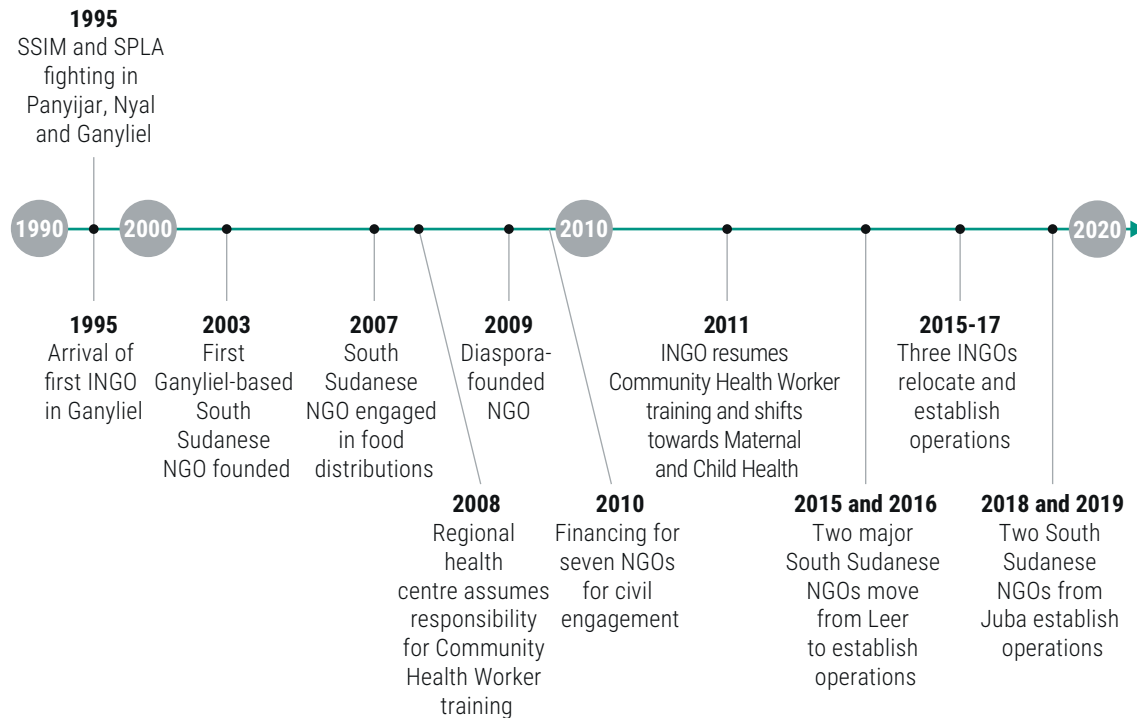
Smaller, local associations also operate in the town, including youth, women's and traders' associations. These tend to have governance structures that involve the election of leaders and may involve contributions from members (this can be in kind, for example, a cup of grain). Many express aspirations to grow into national NGOs.

For NGOs based there today, perhaps Akobo's most important characteristic is its remoteness. It is positioned on the Ethiopia/South Sudan border, but is inaccessible to larger and more urban markets on both sides, particularly in the rainy season when it relies heavily on boat and air access. The conflict has exacerbated this remoteness in a number of ways: within South Sudan, security risks have made travel to larger towns much more difficult, reducing the flow of goods in and out, and since 2014 the government has cut off the phone network. NGOs, both national and international, and the resources that they bring to the area, are therefore important assets for local populations. NGOs are one of the primary sources of WiFi access and radio/satellite communications, and the one large, now national organisation mentioned above plays an important role, for example, in transporting people in and out of the town.

Because NGOs are so central to the economy of these very remote locations, those working for NGOs become important local figures and NGO work is often a precursor to more political roles. This has brought a close interaction between the political and NGO spheres: a number of important local political figures have also played a role in establishing or working for national and international NGOs, and working in the NGO sector is clearly seen as a route to establishing one's authority. As one interviewee from a local association put it: *"It is the first step you can experience in administration."*



2.3.2 Ganyliel



Ganyliel is a town in Panyijar County, the southernmost county in former Unity State. It is surrounded by the Sudd and prone to flooding so has always been very isolated. Though Unity State suffered extensively during Sudan's second civil war,⁴² Panyijar was relatively sheltered from the conflicts of the 1990s. As a result, Ganyliel became an established operating base for several international agencies. Since December 2013, Ganyliel has remained an opposition-controlled area and has remained relatively peaceful, due in part to its remoteness. With areas further north in former Unity State experiencing some of the worst abuses of the conflict, Ganyliel has again been a location in which to seek safety and Panyijar has hosted tens of thousands of internally displaced people.⁴³

The first formal South Sudanese NGO in Panyijar was founded in 2003. Its founder was an influential political and military figure who had been involved with RASS, the humanitarian wing of the South Sudan Independence

Movement (SSIM), and with various international humanitarian agencies. The organisation is well known in the area. It was very active for around ten years but its activities largely ceased once its director became commissioner, and then had little time for the organisation. Since then, a handful of other, smaller associations have emerged. LINCS supported several associations in Ganyliel (and elsewhere), but these struggled to remain active once funding ended. Another organisation was founded with support from the diaspora, and is seen as important locally for having established a library. However, it has not had any funding for several years, partly because Ganyliel's current isolation made it difficult for the organisation's Ganyliel-based members to maintain contact with supporters in the diaspora.

Overall, since 2013, it has become extremely hard for Ganyliel-based organisations without a presence in Juba to access funding. For a variety of reasons, international organisations currently working in the area are focusing on direct

⁴² Craze, J., and J. Tubiana with C. Gramizzi. 'A State of Disunity: Conflict Dynamics in Unity State, South Sudan, 2013–15'. Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2016.

⁴³ Craze, J. et al, 'A State of Disunity: Conflict Dynamics in Unity State.'

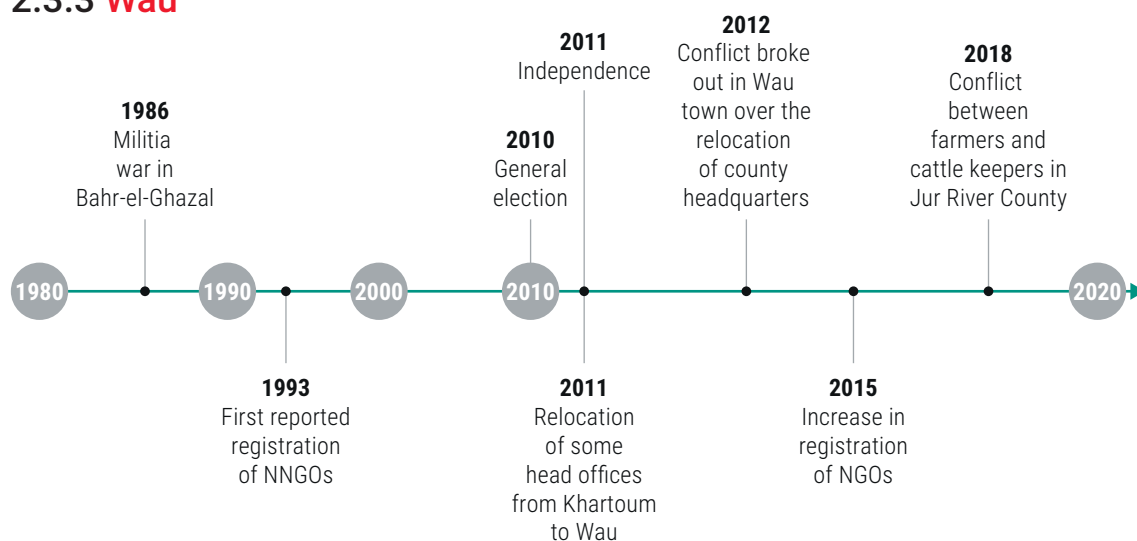


emergency or health programming and are not subcontracting any local organisations. Ganyiel's geographic isolation and lack of connectivity to humanitarian networks and essential logistical systems, such as banks, prevents organisations based there from seeking funding further afield.

A distinct trend, particularly since 2015, is that several large South Sudanese NGOs have established bases and activities in Ganyiel. These are NGOs that were founded elsewhere in South Sudan and have headquarters in Juba. Typically they were founded in, and have founders and staff predominantly from, elsewhere in former Unity State. Two are older organisations, formed in the 2000s; another two were established after the beginning of the conflict. They have primarily chosen Ganyiel as a location because of gaps identified by the cluster system.⁴⁴ Because these South Sudanese NGOs went to Ganyiel at the request of the clusters, with international funding, they could immediately

establish activities in the area. Some NNGOs, like some INGOs, arrived to seek new, stable operating bases after their bases in Bentiu and Leer were attacked. These NNGOs appear to be well connected into the formal, internationally led humanitarian system, especially with others in the same sector. However, unlike international organisations, most do not have internet in their compounds or vehicles of their own, and staff need to walk significant distances on foot to reach project sites. In some cases INGOs allow them to access internet in their compounds, or, if travelling to the same place, to travel in their vehicles. As we have seen in Akobo, there are benefits to having a well resourced compound that can be shared with others. One large South Sudanese NGO in Ganyiel has enabled others to establish a presence in the area, hosting newly arrived South Sudanese NGOs on its compound; this has given it an alternative source of income while also supporting other organisations.

2.3.3 Wau



Wau, in the Bahr-el-Ghazal region, is ethnically diverse, and has complex and divided political and military affiliations. Wau town was controlled by GOS throughout the second Sudanese civil war in the 1980s and 1990s,

though significant parts of the surrounding area were controlled by the SPLA.⁴⁵ Since 2013, the town has remained government-controlled. Fighting erupted within the town itself in February and June 2016, causing significant

⁴⁴ The cluster system has become a dominant feature of the humanitarian structure in South Sudan. The sector-based clusters bring together UN and non-UN humanitarian organisations to coordinate their response.

⁴⁵ Schomerus, M., and T. Allen. *Southern Sudan at Odds with Itself: Dynamics of conflict and predicaments of peace*. Development Studies Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2010.



displacement. In 2018, conflict began between pastoralists from Tonj and farmers in Jur River County, and further violence in Jur River County from March 2019 led to a renewed influx of displaced people into Wau Town.

The presence of international organisations in Wau Town fluctuated throughout OLS. Prior to 1989, several INGOs, ICRC and a number of Sudanese Christian NGOs supported relief operations in Wau Town, but by 1996 only one INGO was still operating in GOS-controlled Wau.⁴⁶ Organisations working in Wau Town operated as part of the OLS 'northern sector', while those operating in the surrounding, SPLA-held rural areas operated as part of the OLS 'southern sector'. As a result, organisations in Bahr-el-Ghazal during this time often worked within a few miles of one another yet had no information about each other's work and operated very separately.⁴⁷

The presence of South Sudanese NGOs in the area expanded from 2005, particularly with the increased funding available for development and capacity building. However, following escalating conflict from 2012 onwards, the funding environment began to shift again. After 2013 very little development funding was available, even in relatively stable areas. In 2016, when conflict escalated in Wau, international organisations shifted their focus again to the area, but maintained an almost exclusive focus on humanitarian activities. At this point a number of new national NGOs, founded elsewhere in the country, also established a presence in Wau. Today, Wau is home to a diverse array of NGOs which vary substantially in size and scope.

Wau, with regular flights and active mobile networks, is much less isolated than some of the other case study sites. However, frustrations around the centralisation of decision-making power and resources in Juba, along with a sense of marginalisation, still emerged from our interviews. For example, participants from some smaller, Wau-based

NGOs – some of which had long histories – expressed frustration that international and national NGOs are able to secure funding to operate in Wau and the surrounding area, but, when they arrive, depend on more 'local' NGOs to reach communities, collect information and implement their activities. Once projects are finished, national and international NGOs receive the credit, while local NGOs are left to attempt to sustain activities without funding or to explain to the community why funding has stopped. At the same time, there are a small number of very active organisations with headquarters in Wau that have been successful in accessing funding.

Insecurity has rendered some areas around Wau much harder to access, with organisations either stopping work or relying on long UN OCHA negotiations. Conflict and inflation have led to significantly increased operating costs, and difficulties in planning budgets, which has caused significant challenges for South Sudanese NGOs.

Local, Wau-based NGOs have played a role in several major peace conferences in the area. One organisation supported the 2005 Mapel peace conference and the 2007 Udici peace conference. More recently, in July 2019, four local organisations working together with UNMISS organised a tri-state peace conference.

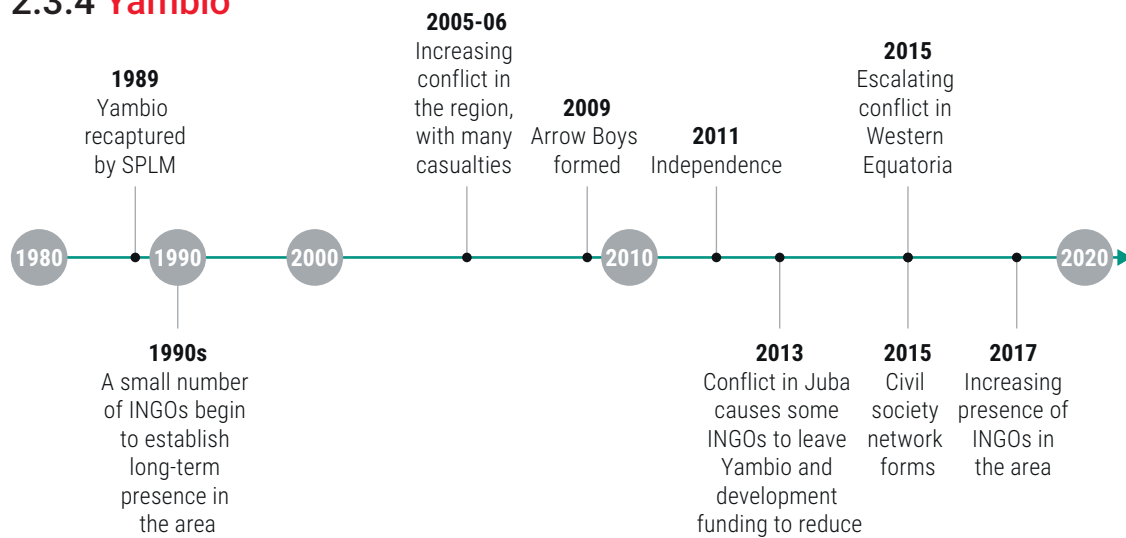
During recent violence in and around Wau town, particularly in 2016, thousands of people sought refuge in church compounds. In the aftermath of this violence, church authorities and associated, church-based NGOs played an important role in responding to the needs of those sheltering in these spaces. Over time, larger South Sudanese NGOs and international NGOs took on a greater role in coordinating and responding to the needs of people living in church compounds. Churches have provided some small material support to emerging NGOs in Wau, for example through the provision of land, but, with limited resources themselves, are rarely able to support NGOs financially.

⁴⁶ Karim, A., et al. 'Operation Lifeline Sudan: A review'.

⁴⁷ Maxwell, D., M. Santschi, and R. Gordon. 'Looking back to Look Ahead? Reviewing key lessons from Operation Lifeline Sudan and past humanitarian operations in South Sudan'. Feinstein International Center, 2014.



2.3.4 Yambio



Yambio is located in former Western Equatoria State, close to the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Central African Republic (CAR). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Yambio was relatively peaceful, although it hosted large numbers of internally displaced people at various times. Some large INGOs established a long-term presence in the area at this time. However, the post-CPA period was one of significant insecurity, violence and humanitarian need. Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) attacks led to the displacement of between 70,000 and 100,000 people,⁴⁸ with many incidences of villages being burned, civilians killed and children abducted. This led to the formation of the Arrow Boys in 2009, a local defence group. International support for those affected by LRA violence was limited and clustered in towns.⁴⁹ Yambio was not directly affected by violence in 2013–15 but tensions nevertheless grew, and widespread fighting started in Western Equatoria in late 2015.

Like Wau, Yambio is home to a large and diverse array of South Sudanese organisations. A senior government official reported the number of local or national NGOs in the area to be around 40. Some of these have long histories, while others have formed more recently. Organisations have often emerged around moments of conflict and instability.

For example, with limited international support for those affected by LRA violence, numerous local organisations were established. These include a number of women's associations, some of which remain active to date, and these have played a role in establishing and supporting the formation of other local organisations. Indeed, there were numerous examples of cooperation between Yambio-based organisations, including local NGOs coming together in consortia to access international funding and the recent formation of a local civil society network.

Many of the NGO founders and leaders interviewed in Yambio emphasised the role of the church in their personal histories and in the histories of their organisations. This included support for their education in CAR, DRC and Uganda, and encouraging, supporting and mentoring them in the development of their organisations. Relatedly, the founders of many of the NGOs recently founded in Yambio spent time, particularly during the CPA interim period, in East Africa, for education, training and workshops. Some participants saw this as important in building their exposure, networks and connectivity which, in turn, helped them when they came to establish their organisations.

⁴⁸ Danish Refugee Council and Danish Demining Group, 'Armed Violence and Stabilization in Western Equatoria: Recovering from the Lord's Resistance Army'. Danish Refugee Council, 10 April 2013.

⁴⁹ Danish Refugee Council and Danish Demining Group.



Although Western Equatoria remained relatively peaceful during 2013–15, organisations in the area were nonetheless deeply affected by the outbreak of conflict and the subsequent shift towards humanitarian funding. A local church leader described how the town “*came to a standstill*” following the outbreak of conflict in Juba in December 2013, with the majority of international staff departing and operations pausing. Many interviewees, particularly from smaller, subnational organisations, reported a reduction in funding. One government official described a “*mindset of waiting [for] and expecting*” support from outsiders as the biggest risk for L/NGOs. Nonetheless, some creative local NGOs have shown what is possible. For example, one organisation, founded in Yambio and now registered nationally, is supporting farmers to market by providing advice, supplying equipment, and buying their produce to resell to large humanitarian organisations.

Although it is a large town connected to various international markets, Yambio retains a sense of remoteness from Juba. In the words of one church leader: “*We are so far from Juba, people in Juba may not have us on the first list, or the first ten. We may be beyond ten on their implementation strategy.*” Research participants in Yambio, particularly during the validation workshop, emphasised that the sense of marginalisation had little to do with distance, but was rather about political marginalisation. One said, for example: “*One [reason] is lack of will from the administration of Juba to put Western Equatoria State in their priority. We are always supported or helped last.*” Compounded by the difficulty of getting funding from donors and international agencies, frustration has been building against “*foreigners who come here, make money and take it elsewhere to spend*”. This has been particularly evident in the case of the youths who sent anonymous threatening letters to INGOs over the lack of jobs for local people and ‘favouring’ of ‘foreigners’ – people from outside the area.

2.4 Lessons learnt from these histories

These case-study specific histories highlight important geographic variations in the way organisations are affected by multiple complex emergencies, along with aid sector and donor dynamics. In Yambio, for example, connections to the DRC, CAR and Uganda are significant. Many of the current leaders of South Sudanese NGOs in Yambio were displaced to, and educated in, CAR and Uganda, often with the support of the church. In Wau, connections to northern Sudan have historically been more significant; several Wau-based NGOs were founded in, or have links to, Khartoum, with many founders and key staff having lived there for several years. The pre-CPA histories of Wau-based NGOs vary significantly between those that operated in rural, SPLA-controlled areas and those that operated in the government-controlled Wau town. In opposition-controlled Ganyiel, Akobo and Tochriak, where phone networks have been shut down and there are no commercial flights, national NGOs occupy a powerful position as brokers for flows of resources, transport and communications between the area and the capital. The other side of this is that, for organisations in these areas without a presence in Juba, accessing resources is almost impossible. NGOs – whether national or international – may be valued locally for different reasons, such as their ability to provide employment or connectivity. These reasons for why NGOs are valued locally are often disconnected from the explicit aims of the NGOs’ projects. For places cut off from Juba, a large organisation with its headquarters in the national capital becomes an important economic and political asset and a resource for the whole community.

Assumptions about South Sudanese NGOs’ relationship to warring parties has also clearly changed over time. During OLS, southern Sudanese NGOs were supported as an alternative to allowing the SPLA to directly control aid. However, even during this period, the SPLA remained closely entangled in the relationship between INGOs, the UN



and southern Sudanese NGOs, and retained a degree of indirect control over aid and southern Sudanese NGOs. Since December 2013, funding to South Sudanese NGOs has increased in parallel with growing donor scepticism about providing funding to the SPLA/M dominated government. Donors have often been explicit about expecting greater distance between South Sudanese NGOs and political authorities.

For some organisations, remaining in a particular place when others evacuate is a moral imperative. It is a key part of their identity and an advantage over international organisations. South Sudanese organisations have indeed played an important role over the last three decades in ensuring that aid reaches remote and conflict-affected communities. One Juba-based founder of a South Sudanese NGO said, for example, that: *“humanitarians were evacuated in [location] but ... I said no that is not our mandate, our mandate is a national organisation, so wherever they [the community] run you go with them.”* Yet this is still a risky decision. South Sudan is a complex and unpredictable operating environment for aid workers: fatalities are among the highest in the world, and the vast majority of those affected (both in international and South Sudanese organisations) are national staff. In many respects, this raises moral questions for a humanitarian sector in South Sudan that is largely shaped by international staff – staff who are able to mitigate their risk but who also incur less risk in the first place because of access to foreign embassy support, budgets to provide medical and evacuation cover, and ‘homes’ to go to outside of South Sudan. The implications of the current financing model are discussed in Section 4. However, it is important to note that the feeling of being abandoned by collaborators in an evacuation is very personal and frightening and can have long reaching repercussions.

Local organisations do not always have better access to communities in times of conflict. Participants frequently identified the inaccessibility of certain places, including rural communities, as a key challenge: many said that there are places they cannot go. As a result, many are limited to working with groups in the towns or in their local area rather than travelling further afield. Research on humanitarian access in other settings has emphasised that: *“Being local is not necessarily sufficient to ensure access. Having the right networks is essential (eg, kinship, tribal ties, shared ethnic background, common past activist work, political affiliation).”*⁵⁰

Interviewees described various approaches to managing insecurity. One common strategy for navigating conflict and working with different actors is to emphasise your identity as a humanitarian and to adjust your language appropriately. Related to this is a need to compromise, agreeing to authorities’ requests in some cases and refusing in other cases, primarily by emphasising accountability to donors and the need to remain neutral. Relationships with authorities are explored further in Section 5. Like international organisations, South Sudanese NGOs must actively navigate various dynamics to ensure staff safety. Participants described, for example, having to *“be very vigilant in terms of who to send where”*, and avoiding sending people to places where they might be seen as belonging to an *“enemy community”*. Others are able to draw on connections to international actors for protection. For example, one Juba-based organisation engaging on governance issues described how *“The international community speaks and when they speak it provides some level of protection to us.”* Another strategy is to form networks or coalitions with other South Sudanese organisations who can protect and support one another.

⁵⁰ Svoboda, E., V. Barbelet, and I. Mosel. ‘Holding the keys: Humanitarian access and local organisations’. Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, January 2018.



3 Organisational histories and institutional development

3.1 Origins and founders

The research highlighted the diversity of organisations' origins and founding stories. Starting points for organisations inevitably vary: from membership-based organisations formed by a group of people coming together to support one another to organisations founded in Juba with the aim from the outset being to establish a national NGO. Successfully founding and growing an organisation typically requires significant resources (for registration, start-up costs and to begin developing a track record) and social and political capital (including, in some cases, connections with, and experience or knowledge of navigating, the international humanitarian system).

Many of the larger South Sudanese NGOs have prominent founders whose success is, in part, connected to their pre-existing personal networks, skills, experience and ambition. These people often have several years' experience working for international organisations, and many have spent a significant amount of time living and studying in neighbouring countries (and, in some cases, further afield). Some left jobs in relatively senior roles in international organisations in order to start an NGO. This experience is a significant advantage in getting an organisation off the ground. These founders are often well versed in the language and practices of international organisations. While this includes formal skills, especially in accounting, reporting and communication, developed through various training and secondments, it is also about learning the subtle practices, cues and ways of working needed to successfully navigate

the international system and to gain the trust and confidence of international partners. Many founders also have existing relationships of trust and familiarity with people within international organisations who can offer advice, mentorship and initial connections into the system.

However, this is not always the case, and there are some notable exceptions. There are other important relationships of mentorship and support as well: between South Sudanese organisations and with other institutions, including churches. In several cases, church leaders have been instrumental in helping people to found organisations.

Though there is significant competition for funding, there are examples of individuals within South Sudanese NGOs helping others to set up their own organisations, sitting on the board and providing mentorship. South Sudanese NGOs in some cases rely on networks with other organisations for support: sharing expertise, buffering themselves against shocks, and sometimes loaning money to each other in difficult times.

In interviews, founders gave several different motives for establishing their organisations. Many were motivated by personal histories of struggle, displacement and deprivation – of themselves, their families and communities. Often, the impetus for founding an organisation is the perception that a particular need is not currently being met. This is typically narrated as an issue relating to the limited reach of international agencies. In founders' own narratives there is frequently a sense of 'pushing back' against the international community or filling a gap that has been left, particularly where they feel there are particular groups or areas



that are not being reached. Some also described creating employment and bringing jobs to an area as a key motivation or achievement. Others described wanting to leave a legacy and become known, or to create something that would continue after them. For some who left international organisations to found or work in South Sudanese NGOs, there is a desire to test their skills and invest them in something over which they have more control, and where they can see the impact of their work.

Women in South Sudan have consistently played important roles in peacebuilding and in civil society over many decades.⁵¹ There are women's organisations and women-led NGOs in our case study sites, and in South Sudan more broadly, that have been active for a long time. These range from small associations responding to the needs of their members and communities to large, women-led NGOs implementing internationally funded projects. They include women-led organisations in Wau and Yambio that have received external funding and have also maintained significant membership bases of women who regularly contribute to the organisation. A new but active female-led NNGO with compounds in Juba and Tochriak was funded by South Sudanese women and was visibly able to draw upon different social expectations that come from being educated, urban, well connected women. It is still true, however, that women face greater challenges than men in founding, leading and working for NGOs and in accessing funding for their organisations. Deeply entrenched gender inequalities in South Sudan mean that women are less likely to possess the social, economic and political capital (for example, education or access to resources and connections) needed to establish a successful or large-scale NGO. Rural women struggle to gain visibility, and connections to Juba, especially when education levels are low.

3.2 Transitions

3.2.1 Becoming 'national'

There is no linear trend from being a 'local' to a 'national' organisation, nor is this shift inevitable; some organisations remain rooted in a specific location. Yet many organisations aspire to become a large, national NGO, and others narrate the shift from 'local' to 'national' as an important point in their history. This is often associated with being registered at the national level and having a physical presence in the capital, and with working in more than one location. The importance of becoming 'national' is driven, in part, by the centralisation of the international humanitarian system, which means that funding opportunities are weighted to a very significant extent towards organisations with a visible presence in Juba. Many organisations invest significant resources in establishing a presence in the capital. The centralisation of the system is a source of frustration for organisations that lack a presence in Juba, some of which have long histories and strong membership bases, but see newer NNGOs with a presence in Juba and a knack for navigating the international system rapidly accessing funding. There are further complaints if NNGOs (as well as INGOs) sent from Juba depend on local NGOs and community-based organisations to reach communities and collect information without offering much in return. The centralisation of the humanitarian system – and the pull to the centre that it creates – has unintended consequences. For example, organisations are incentivised to prioritise their presence and credibility in Juba, sometimes prior to or in place of developing strong links in a particular area.

⁵¹ See, for example, Mai, N.H. 'The Role of Women in Peace-Building in South Sudan'. The Sudd Institute, 1 December 2015, and Mayen, A.A. 'Women in Peace Making Processes in South Sudan'. The Sudd Institute, 18 April 2013.



The desire to expand into a 'national' organisation is not only about material benefits. Organisations frequently described their motivation as relating to a particular vision of who they are and who they want their organisation to serve. In particular, this shift from 'local' to 'national' was often driven by a desire to serve a wider (national) community rather than the specific community they grew out of, intentionally avoiding particularistic identities. For example, the founder of a nascent South Sudanese NGO now working in Tochriak stated: *"We thought it would be something small, but there are lots of people that need help. And if you do something small to these people and the other people need help, then they will say that you are only helping them because you are from there. So, then you want to help other people too."* Similar statements were seen across case study sites and types of organisation. In a typical statement, a Yambio-based NGO worker described wanting to be *"serving the community of South Sudan at large"*. Some South Sudanese have also intentionally staffed their NGOs to reflect the diversity of South Sudanese identities in order to access different communities and avoid being partisan.

3.2.2 Side projects to full-time founders

The stories of national organisations frequently involved a significant turning point at which their founders became full time and quit other employment. This can be a risky decision, particularly as many South Sudanese NGO employees support extended family members with their salaries. There is often a significant salary cut associated with leaving an international organisation to work with a national one, as well as the loss of health insurance and other benefits. Yet this is often narrated as a key turning point in the history of the organisation, leading to significant

expansion. For example, one NGO founded in Yambio in 2011 operated on a small scale for its first six years. In 2017, founding members decided to focus on the organisation full time. One quit a senior, Juba-based role in an international organisation, while another had just returned from a master's programme in the UK. They were then able to secure a two-year project from a UN agency, which gave them the stability they needed to expand, invest in their systems and recruit experienced staff.

On the other hand, organisations frequently struggle to survive the loss of a founder (for example, if they move abroad because of conflict, threats to their life, ill health or for further education; or if they move into politics). There are numerous cases of once-successful organisations becoming dormant or ceasing to exist when founders have left. The reliance on founders appears to be exacerbated by the challenges South Sudanese NGOs face in recruiting and keeping qualified staff, because of a lack of adequate resources (discussed further in Section 4). This makes it difficult for founders to build sustainable and resilient teams around them and this, in turn, deepens the reliance on founders. Yet there are counter-examples, where transitions from a founding executive director to new executive director have been smooth (and have led the organisation to new successes) and where leaders have intentionally sought to distribute power.

Governance structures and leadership transitions may be very different for different types of organisation. Associations tend to be less individualised, with governance structures that engage wider groups and involve the election of leaders. Yet these organisations do not necessarily see themselves as qualitatively different and often express strong aspirations to grow in the way that national NGOs have, in order to attract more funding to better support their members and communities.



3.2.3 Expansion and trust-building

Securing larger, longer-term funding is often an important turning point in the development of an organisation. As well as allowing organisations to submit more competitive proposals (meeting requirements for co-financing or pre-financing, for example), large-scale funding demonstrates trust from donors which is often crucial in securing the trust (and funding) of other donors, and from potential staff. Reaching this 'tipping point' – securing reliable, longer-term funding that allows an organisation to take off – is often a mixture of skilful navigation of the system, trust-building and chance. For some organisations this turning point has come as a result of a particular partnership, grant or initiative that has allowed longer term investment in the organisation and its core functions. Once a degree of visibility, a track record and reserve funding has been established, it becomes easier to continue to grow.

To access the large-scale funding associated with the international humanitarian system, South Sudanese NGOs invest a lot of time and money winning the trust of international organisations. Many participants believed that INGOs were better funded because they were better known and trusted by donors. Large South Sudanese NGOs often attributed their own initial funding successes to moments or experiences when they were able to build relationships and trust within the international community. This might be based either on individual staff members' past experiences working with international organisations, or through the organisation receiving a small grant or initiating a partnership with an international organisation that has led to further funding. For several, now large organisations, this trust was built through their role in responding to the post-2013 humanitarian crisis.

However, building these relationships and this visibility often depends on proximity to donors and to centres of decision-making. This was seen in the 1990s, when the first funded South Sudanese NGOs were based in Nairobi, in close proximity to donors and the offices of international agencies working in southern Sudan under OLS. Since 2005, and the move of donors and INGOs to Juba, people now emphasise building relationships in the new capital instead.

South Sudanese NGOs also thought it was important to build trust from donors through relationships and social interaction, especially early in their histories. Some NGO founders described relationships of trust that they had built while working for INGOs. One large NGO attributed its significant growth in the post-CPA period to its ability to host international visitors on its compound in a remote area. As it had the only compound in the area at the time, many staff of international organisations and donors would stay there when visiting the region. This allowed the NGO to build up relationships of trust with various key actors and this helped its access to funding.

The other side of this is that it is difficult for new organisations to break into the system, particularly for those without a presence in Juba. As other reports have noted, international agencies partner with a small subset of 'preferred' organisations and there is a risk of overburdening larger, successful, primarily Juba-based NGOs and overlooking others.⁵² Yet for smaller local or subnational organisations, the picture is often very different. Some membership-based organisations and women's associations manage to exist and sustain activities over a long period without, or with little, international funding, as discussed further in Section 4. Others exist without funding in a state of 'dormancy', seeking funding from international actors, attending cluster meetings and writing proposals.

⁵² Ali, et al., 'Funding to Local Humanitarian Actors' p7.



Technical abilities and performance are clearly also perceived to play a role in the building of trust. Many South Sudanese NGOs felt that their funding continued over time (or failed to continue) because of an ability (or inability) to implement programmes well and to demonstrate this implementation through reporting. Where possible, South Sudanese NGOs invested in independent audits of accounts, or in staff with the capacity for programmatic and financial reporting. In the 1990s, the Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance explicitly used funding to some of the earliest South Sudanese NGOs as a test to see which would actually implement and report effectively. Those that did gained further funding. The histories of current, successful South Sudanese NGOs generally track an increase in funding over time following successfully implemented programmes. They recognise the benefit of spending time to implement well in order to demonstrate that they can be trusted.

At the same time, some South Sudanese NGOs believe that an inherent lack of trust meant they were held to a higher standard than INGOs. Some established South Sudanese NGOs lost significant funding after relatively minor financial discrepancies, even though some of these happened during periods of active conflict when they had to evacuate their offices with little warning.



4 Funding challenges and strategies

4.1 Accessing international funding

With limited access to donors outside the country and few opportunities for domestic fundraising, South Sudanese NGOs depend to a significant extent on UN and INGO subcontracts and, to a lesser extent, access to pooled funds. In 2017, South Sudanese NGOs received approximately \$68.9 million in direct and indirect funding, representing around 4.9 per cent of total funds given to the humanitarian crisis response, primarily channelled through UN and INGO intermediaries.⁵³ South Sudanese NGOs *directly* received 0.3 per cent of total funds tracked through the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA)'s Financial Tracking Service. The UN received 62.1 per cent of total humanitarian funds for South Sudan between 2013 and 2017.⁵⁴ The amount they pass on to South Sudanese NGOs varies; approximately 45 per cent of World Food Programme (WFP)'s partners, for example, are South Sudanese NGOs.⁵⁵

Accessing the large quantities of funding potentially available through UN agencies requires a significant amount of know-how. Some South Sudanese NGOs, especially those headquartered in Juba, have been very savvy in approaching international organisations for funding. They often draw on founding members' experience of working for international organisations to demonstrate

that they have a track record in humanitarian work and experience of programmatic and financial accountability. South Sudanese individuals who have worked for INGOs or the UN also learn to use the language of the international humanitarian system and to show they appreciate international interpretations of the humanitarian situation. There are now people working as consultants in Juba who, for a fee, can provide expertise and advice on how to set up an NGO and write organisational constitutions, policies and grants. This adds to the already significant costs of founding and growing an NGO, which include registration fees and, in some cases, legal fees, as well as the costs of establishing a presence in Juba.

Large international donors, including UN agencies, often require organisations to pre-finance projects and also encourage co-financing. Pre-financing is very challenging. Organisations may be able to apply for funding for a certain percentage of a project from another donor. Alternatively, as many INGOs do, they (without necessarily making it visible) borrow funds from one project to pre-finance another. However, this can leave other projects vulnerable if payments are late, which jeopardises implementation and leaves NGOs easily open to accusations of corruption. Other organisations delay salary payments to manage pre-financing and late disbursements of funds, but this affects staff motivation.

⁵³ Ali, et al., 'Funding to Local Humanitarian Actors'. p7.

⁵⁴ Ali, et al. p7.

⁵⁵ Ali, et al. p9.



Case study: navigating the UN system

One relatively new, Juba-based national organisation offers a clear example of skilfully navigating the UN system, as well as the importance of building trust through both 'know-how' of the system and good implementation. The organisation was founded by a group of people (primarily South Sudanese) with significant experience of working with international agencies in South Sudan and Uganda. They first registered the organisation in 2013 and secured office space in Juba. They then approached five UN agencies, two of which agreed to a meeting. Without a track record of activities to share, they focused instead on the experience of the founding members. One of the UN agencies provided the organisation with an initial grant for a three-month nutrition project. Once satisfied with the implementation of this project, the UN agency gave them further funding. This allowed the NGO to build a track record and begin securing funds from other UN agencies.

Over time they began to receive funds from two additional UN agencies and this allowed them to establish activities and coordination offices in other parts of the country. They then identified the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund (SSHF) as an important potential funding source. They contacted cluster coordinators for advice and realised that they needed to begin attending the cluster meetings and be included in the HRP. They submitted proposals to five clusters, and two were accepted for inclusion in the HRP. They were then able to secure funding from SSHF for camp coordination and camp management (CCCM). They were later also able to secure Health Pooled Fund (HPF) funding as part of a consortium with an international NGO.

4.2 How South Sudanese NGOs are shaped by donor funding

Donor priorities and funding influence South Sudanese NGOs in many ways. Key among these are, firstly, the ways that international funding modalities can undermine organisational sustainability and capacity and, secondly, how donor funding can influence the mandates and activities of South Sudanese NGOs.

4.2.1 Funding challenges and organisational sustainability

A consistent, central concern for South Sudanese NGOs is the challenge of securing quality, long-term funding that can cover core costs and support institutional development. Funding for South Sudanese NGOs is frequently short term, project-based and prescriptive, with little or no support for core organisational costs and few opportunities to invest in assets such as buildings, office equipment or vehicles. This makes it difficult to plan, and hinders investment in institutional processes and systems. Several recent studies in South Sudan highlight this,⁵⁶ and this is reiterated in our own research.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Alcayna, T., and F. Al-Murani. 'A City-Specific Focus on Local and International Collaboration: Tacloban, Ormoc and Palo (the Philippines); Medellín (Colombia); Juba (South Sudan)'. IIED, November 2016; Tanner, L., and L. Moro. 'Missed Out: The role of local actors in the humanitarian response in the South Sudan conflict'. CAFOD and Trócaire, Christian Aid, Oxfam GB and Tearfund, 28 April 2016.



The lack of access to long term, quality funding undermines organisational sustainability and capacity. Crucially, South Sudanese NGOs struggle to hire and retain experienced staff as funding is too small or intermittent, encouraging staff to move to international organisations. While UN agencies and INGOs pay higher wages for their staff, implicit or explicit budget expectations mean that South Sudanese NGOs cannot budget for the same wages. As a result, there is a palpable sense of frustration around the idea of capacity-building activities: South Sudanese NGOs emphasise that ‘capacity’ also depends on having reliable funding to support core organisational functions, such as finance, logistics and human resources, and to hire and retain experienced staff.

This reiterates recent research by the Evidence and Learning Facility South Sudan (ELFSS) synthesising learning from the DFID Humanitarian Assistance and Resilience in South Sudan (HARISS) programme. The research highlights the ‘subtly different’ ways in which international agencies and South Sudanese NGOs talk about ‘capacity’: the former tend to refer to the *“ability to perform core functions of the humanitarian system”* while the latter focus on their *“ability to overcome structural barriers to their autonomy”*. The examples given by international agencies of ways in which South Sudanese NGOs lack capacity – such as poor reporting quality – are often symptoms of having inadequate resources.⁵⁷ Ultimately, the ELFSS research highlights that South Sudanese face *“structural barriers in terms of access to resources and decision-making that impact their ability to implement programming”* and, because of this, they may be described by international counterparts as lacking ‘capacity’.⁵⁸

Similarly, in interviews conducted for this study, participants frequently described ‘capacity’ as relating to access to sufficient, reliable funding which in turn allows them to cover organisational costs and hire experienced staff. For example, the executive director of a women-led organisation in Wau said: *“We don’t have enough resources to keep the staff. We build their capacity and at the end [the INGOs] take them.”* Similarly, the director of an organisation in Yambio said: *“The international NGO will say you don’t have capacity but the budget they give you is not enough to get the competent person. There is a contradiction there ... The more they keep budgets low you can’t hire competent people, there is no way your capacity will change.”*

The executive director of a Juba-based NGO, similarly emphasising the correlation between capacity, funding and the ability to recruit well qualified personnel, said: *“If you say you need a local partner to perform well, the question is, have you given them the necessary support to really do this work?”* This is reinforced by other studies, including research from South Sudan⁵⁹ and the Philippines.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Umayam, H. ‘What We Talk about When We Talk about “Capacity”: The barriers to localisation in humanitarian aid include how we talk about local partners’. CSRF South Sudan (blog), 26 September 2019.

⁵⁸ Evidence and Learning Facility, South Sudan (ELFSS). ‘ELFSS Learnings from HARISS: Examining Barriers to the Localisation Agenda and Reframing “Capacity”: Synthesis Study 3’. IMC Worldwide and Forcier, July 2019.

⁵⁹ Alcayna, T., and Al-Murani, F. ‘A City-Specific Focus on Local and International Collaboration’; see also Ali et al.

⁶⁰ Featherstone, A. ‘Time to move on: National perspectives on transforming surge capacity’. CAFOD, Christian Aid, Tearfund and Islamic Relief Worldwide, January 2017..



Case study: resourcing organisational capacity

This case study concerns one of the longest-standing South Sudanese organisations in Wau, which has managed to significantly grow its institutional capacity over time. The organisation was founded in 1994 in rural, SPLM/A-controlled western Bahr-el-Ghazal by a group of young ‘intellectuals’ with the aim of supporting hard-to-reach communities that were not served by the UN and INGOs. It established offices in Nairobi in order to receive funds, and in Lokichoggio in Kenya (which, at the time, was the operating base for the southern sector of OLS to coordinate with OLS agencies). It also maintained its headquarters in Mapel (Bahr-el-Ghazal).

In 1998, during a devastating famine in Bahr-el-Ghazal, the organisation began to receive funds from a major partnership-based INGO, which has continued to support it ever since. The CPA brought significant changes, with the organisation shifting its headquarters to Jur River and beginning to access longer-term, developmental funding, through which it developed a track record that led to further multi-year projects. The organisation has grown significantly over time, with the support of a number of long-term partners. One INGO has supported the organisation continuously for over two decades, and has helped it secure multi-year funding from larger donors by acting as a referee, reviewing proposals, and co-funding costs. It has also helped the organisation to increase its international exposure. The impact of longer-term funding on the organisation has been significant. While short-term projects rarely allow the purchase of assets, multi-year funding has allowed the organisation to invest in assets (including vehicles) and to retain key staff. The organisation has also been able to acquire land and construct a head office in Wau town.

While funding shortfalls have obvious material and logistical implications, they also pose a threat to relationships with communities and can affect organisations’ social and political relationships, trust and legitimacy. Interviews highlighted that delays in, or cessation of, funding, and the ensuing gaps in service provision, can undermine relationships with communities, leading to a sense of frustration and even mistrust. Finding ways to smooth the gaps between projects can therefore be an important part of maintaining trust and legitimacy with local communities.

4.2.2 Donor influences

Indubitably, international funding has shaped the character of the South Sudanese NGO sector. Organisations are under significant pressure to respond to the shifting needs and priorities of donors, whether in terms of

the locations where they work or the types of activities they undertake. Reports describe South Sudanese organisations needing to ‘mirror INGOs,’⁶¹ shifting their focus and areas of expertise in order to access funding. While this is primarily driven by funding pressures, it is exacerbated by the types of training and capacity support available, which have often focused on the reporting and procedural skills required for particular projects and to meet donors’ accountability requirements.⁶²

South Sudanese NGO leaders are highly cognisant of this issue, and it was raised as a major concern during interviews and validation workshops. Participants emphasised that funding pressures have led them to agree to take on work in sectors that are not their priorities. Meanwhile there is little flexible funding available that would allow organisations to follow their own priorities and mandates. This means that organisations may shift from one sector to another, or take

⁶¹ Alcayna and Al-Murani, ‘A City-Specific Focus on Local and International Collaboration’, p 21

⁶² Fenton, et al, ‘Fragile Relationships’; Massoud, M.F. ‘Work Rules: How international NGOs build law in war-torn societies’. *Law & Society Review* 49, no. 2 (June 2015): 333–364.



on new sectors and locations just to access funding. Instead of focusing on a niche, and building capacity in a particular thematic area, organisations tend to present themselves as a 'jack of all trades'. One participant in the validation workshop in Wau stated, for example, that international agencies *"are driving us out of what we have in our constitution or in our mandate"*; another agreed that, if your focus is not on humanitarian work, *"you leave your original mandate."*

Evidently, there are strong incentives to accept any funding that is offered. Yet the picture is not clear-cut and there are also instances when organisations turn down funding. For example, some larger organisations have turned down funding that would require them to work in a new geographic or thematic area in which they do not have pre-existing connections or expertise. One organisation focusing on agriculture, for example, had been offered funding to work on education and health but turned it down, reflecting that they *"want to stick to one thing and do it well"*. Others have turned down funding to start working in a new location for a number of reasons: they don't have existing links in the new location, there could be tensions with other national organisations already working there, the area is insecure, or because it would take a lot of funding to set up a new office. This also relates, importantly, to reputation. NNGO staff, experienced in navigating the humanitarian system, know that reputation is crucial. If they agree to take on a new sector or location and don't deliver well, it can severely affect their ability to continue attracting funding. However, examples of organisations turning down funding are rare, and typically came from well-established organisations with a range of different funding sources.

4.3 How do South Sudanese NGOs sustain their activities?

South Sudanese NGOs sustain themselves and their activities without international funding in a variety of ways. Though opportunities for domestic fundraising are limited, organisations frequently find creative ways to fill funding gaps. This includes income-generating activities, contributions by members, founders and the board, and working voluntarily. Some NGOs have also managed to raise funds with support from relatives and others in the diaspora.

The widespread deployment of these strategies also illustrates the agency of local and national organisation's staff and their ability to 'get things done' even without international support. This partially counters common assumptions about South Sudanese organisations, for example that they are purely dependent on international funding, are donor-driven or are founded simply to access funding. It is possible that if these strategies were better understood and were explicitly supported by donors, this could help organisations to develop a core funding base that is not dependent on the whims of international funding. Where the support of international partners has allowed an organisation to build premises that can be rented out, for example, this has led to a source of income that lasts long after the particular grant has ended (discussed further below).

4.3.1 Contributions from members, founders and the board

Most organisations have some form of contribution from their board members, membership base or founders. For some, this funding is a 'stop-gap' to sustain them while they await the next grant, while others are membership-based organisations for whom this is the core of their organisation. Some membership organisations initiated their activities through monthly member



contributions and manage to operate consistently in this way for many years, expanding if they manage to access external funding but otherwise operating without donor support. This may be combined with other sources of income such as renting out meeting hall space. At the same time, many of these membership-based organisations do not have a presence in Juba or knowledge of how best to navigate the international system, and so can struggle to attract external support.

Somewhat differently, many organisations were established with contributions from a group of founders. As noted above, the founders of many large, national South Sudanese NGOs previously worked for international agencies. Others have worked for the private sector or in the civil service. It appears to be relatively common for organisations to be established using initial funding from the founder(s)' salaries. Some have left a job and used their savings to establish their own organisation or, more commonly, have set up the organisation on the side while continuing to work for an international NGO or private business. This way, they can use money from their salary to get the organisation off the ground and to pay initial staff members, to fund some initial activities, or even to finance an assessment that can then be used to demonstrate a particular need to donors. Founders have also given significant in-kind support, including buildings and their unsalaried time. Sometimes founders end up working for their organisations full time, while others may become part of the board. Founders often forego their own salaries when there are other budget demands. Some board members continue to contribute financially even when they have external funding; this money may help sustain an organisation during difficult times or ensure key staff continue to be paid between projects.

In other cases, organisations were founded with profits from business. One NNGO, for example, was founded in 2014 by a businessman from Mayom, living in Juba. He was moved by the plight of the people he met when he first returned to Mayom after the outbreak of conflict in December 2013, and he

used his own money to fund a distribution of school materials. Back in Juba, he convened a board of seven business people who agreed to contribute monthly. In 2017, the organisation was struggling to attract donor funding. The executive director told the board that the challenge was in the organisation's ability to hire skilled people and the board agreed to more than double their monthly contributions. As a result they were able to hire more highly qualified staff which, in turn, allowed them to secure more funding and to grow significantly. Another NNGO, recently founded in Juba but operating in Tochriak, is partly funded by the profits its founder makes from shares in a Juba petrol station. This NNGO's funding is also supplemented by board members who work for international organisations.

While South Sudanese churches typically have limited funding of their own, they support South Sudanese NGOs in other material ways. Some have provided land, buildings and office equipment to local NGOs. Sometimes church leaders sit on the board of NGOs, and they may provide references for the organisation or vouch for them to international partners.

4.3.2 Income-generating activities

A common strategy, particularly seen for some older and more established NGOs, is to rent out meeting halls, rooms in guesthouses and office space. Some also rent out chairs, tents and equipment for events, or establish small farms and generate income from the produce. This is primarily possible where organisations have previously received larger-scale funding that has allowed them to invest in assets, or when a building has been constructed for them by an international organisation as a form of in-kind support. Some rent this equipment out to other organisations below the market rate for community activities. Some groups also make and sell food and goods, reinvesting income into the organisation. Organisations frequently seek to move away from renting (particularly of offices and vehicles) in order to ensure their organisational sustainability and to make their



funding bids more competitive. However, this typically depends on access to larger, multi-year funding which allows the purchase of assets.

The revenue raised from these activities is typically used to cover core costs, pay salaries and run small-scale activities not otherwise covered by donor funding. This can make a significant difference to an organisation's ability to regularly pay staff. For example, a national NGO operating in Ganyliel had a compound with a guesthouse, offices and meeting hall, constructed with funding from an international donor during a project that has now ended. They host other national NGOs in the compound, particularly those that have moved to the area from Juba. The money raised has been used to renovate and expand the facilities, and some is saved so that it can pay staff salaries and operation costs in case of gaps in funding. The organisation's field officer notes: *"This is how people can grow. We cannot wait for the donor to fund us but we can also do what we can."*

4.3.3 Working voluntarily

Local and national NGO staff often work without pay to ensure that activities continue despite funding gaps, especially when they fear that stopping work will do harm. This is despite the fact that staff and volunteers are frequently supporting extended families. For example, the director of a women-led organisation in Wau said: *"Sometimes there is a gap in getting new projects ... in this case there is no salary, we work as volunteers, because protection is not something that we just need today and tomorrow, kalas [finished]."* Another organisation received six months' funding from the SSHF to open a women- and girl-friendly space, but they did not get further funding for this project. The staff working at the centre have continued to run the programme on a voluntary basis since March 2019. Staff who are still employed on other projects have used their salaries to fund things that are needed. The centre has also supported at least 25 women's groups, which have been able to establish income-generating activities. The organisation's executive director emphasised that work on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is not something that can be done on a short term basis: *"SGBV programming should not be a short-term thing. Things to do with GBV bring confidence building, trust building, if someone is close to you and shares all her details, and tomorrow the project comes to an end, you break the heart of these survivors. They feel betrayed."*

However, voluntary work can create complex expectations of reciprocity. Some interviewees spoke of the assumption that if funding was gained, the benefits would be shared between the volunteers.



Case study: a Yambio-based, women-led organisation

This organisation was founded in 2009 by a group of women in Yambio, and registered at the state level in 2011. It has maintained its headquarters in Yambio and has opened an additional five branches across former Western Equatoria State. Between 2009 and 2013 the organisation existed using only the members' own contributions, which it used to buy land for an office and to hire someone to write a constitution. In 2013 it began receiving funding from an international, partnership-based peacebuilding organisation. The organisation provided training for women from all six branches on leadership, advocacy, peacebuilding, counselling and trauma healing. This support ended in 2016 and the organisation has subsequently received short-term grants from other international organisations. However, many of its services, such as weekly counselling activities, continue regularly whether or not the funding is there. It registered at the Juba level in 2018.

Throughout this time it has remained at its core a membership-based organisation; members contribute regularly and each branch sends an affiliation fee to the head office every year. This funding is assessed at the end of the year to see how much has been raised; some then goes back to those who have contributed (enabling them to invest in their own small businesses) and some remains for the organisation to pay its core operating costs, such as office equipment, electricity and fencing for the compound. Additional funding is raised from making and selling biscuits, bread, bed sheets and other items.

4.4 Funding, insecurity and risk

The security risks faced by South Sudanese NGOs are closely related to their economic risks. Many report that they are not properly resourced to effectively manage the complex, risky environments in which they operate. A common distinction between INGOs and South Sudanese NGOs is the assumption that South Sudanese NGOs do not evacuate during times of crisis. South Sudanese NGOs' claims to remain with communities is a key part of their means of legitimisation with communities and with donors. Some South Sudanese NGOs were explicitly founded in response to the evacuation of international NGOs, as organisations that, in contrast, would not leave the area. For donors, this allows humanitarian activities to continue despite high security risks. However, expecting local organisations to extend access to conflict-affected populations, without resourcing them properly, undermines their ability to protect and support their staff. This is clearly demonstrated in recent research by InterAction in South Sudan and Nigeria which found that the pressure to be

low cost, combined with limited funding for fixed costs in awards, increases security risks for South Sudanese NGOs. They note that: *"In the end, the costs are borne by South Sudanese NGO staff members who frequently go unpaid, forego safe and secure accommodation, and take additional risks in how and when they move in the field."*⁶³

The lack of opportunities to buy assets – particularly vehicles – can exacerbate the security risks faced by staff of local organisations. Limited funds force organisations to seek ways to cut costs. For example, if staff travel to a location for several days, they might rent a vehicle only for the first and last day to drop off and pick up staff, with the vehicle returning to town in the interim period rather than remaining with the staff. Yet leaving staff without a vehicle poses a security risk. Interviewees commented on the double standards seen when international organisations invest in the safety of their own staff yet do not resource local partners sufficiently. One South Sudanese NGO director interviewed in this research reported that she has tried to include funding for security training for staff, insurance, medical cover and staff evacuation in proposals, but has had these budget lines removed.

⁶³ Hamsik, 'NGOs & Risk', p4.



5 NGOs, politics and public authority

This section examines how South Sudanese NGOs engage in, and are influenced by, national and subnational political economies, including their relationships with political power and public authority. It explores three key elements of the relationship between NGOs, authority and political power. Firstly, it highlights the authority of South Sudanese NGOs themselves. Drawing on the case study discussions above, it argues that South Sudanese NGOs are often important and powerful players in local political economies, particularly in more remote locations where they act as brokers of resources, services and employment between the centre and periphery. It also considers more explicit overlaps between NGOs and political power, for example, how people are able to build their authority through NGO work and then move into politics. Secondly, it considers how NGOs navigate their relationships with local authorities. It highlights the challenges that NGOs face and the demands placed on them by local authorities who, in many cases, have fewer resources than the NGOs themselves. Finally, the third part of this section considers how the international humanitarian system can exacerbate, entrench or alleviate some of the challenges faced by South Sudanese NGOs in their relationships with authorities and communities.

Our research highlights the intricacies of South Sudanese NGOs' daily interactions with government authorities and communities, and the precarious ways these shift over time. This also underlines the complex ways that authority is constructed, reconstructed and deconstructed in South Sudan. Many of the main pressures on South Sudanese NGOs in daily life from local authorities and armed actors are not about political alliances, but about authority over resources.

Commentators have attributed conflict in South Sudan to polarised wartime alliances and the monetised trade in loyalties. This has marketised politics, war and rebellion in South Sudan, and meant that authority can be built through violent rebellion or by controlling a budget that can be used to buy loyalty. However, these are not the only ways that authority is constructed in South Sudan: many South Sudanese have used NGOs to create space for an alternative authority among communities.

In debates about localisation during complex emergencies, it is essential to be aware of these realities and the importance of the reshaping of public authority. Globally, some INGOs have cautioned against the localisation agenda in environments of armed conflict, arguing that it is almost impossible for L/ NNGOs to uphold humanitarian principles in these times of turmoil and scarcity. A significant concern is that local actors embedded in local socio-political dynamics will be unable to assess needs and provide assistance in a professionally impartial manner, especially when considering the repercussions of not providing certain people with assistance. The claim is also made that during armed conflicts citizens of the country take political sides with the warring parties, meaning it is impossible for national NGO workers or organisations to remain neutral. However, this assumes that war is a political contestation between two sides, capable of polarising the whole population.

A further concern in the South Sudanese context is that the monetised nature of politics and violence could make it even harder for South Sudanese organisations to resist pressure to fund or support the warring parties. Various commentators have described



South Sudan as having a political market in which political loyalties are bought and sold for money, and in which violent rebellions are used to claim money. A popular analysis of the December 2013 outbreak of violence in South Sudan blamed it on this monetised system. In such a system, those in power would have to amass personal political budgets to stay in power. De Waal claims that the genesis of this political system was in SPLA corruption, and their theft and manipulation of aid from INGOs and UN agencies in the 1980s.⁶⁴ South Sudanese NGOs partly started to gain funding in the 1990s because of this decline in trust in the SPLA by international actors. In the 1980s and 1990s, the SPLA and individual commanders clearly did take a significant amount of humanitarian aid with impunity. In light of this history, it makes sense for donors to think critically about the possibility that this could happen again and to pay close attention to how South Sudanese NGOs respond to political and economic demands.

While this caution is appropriate, it can easily conceal two inappropriate assumptions. Firstly, there is an assumption that South Sudanese NGOs, compared to INGOs, do not have the same ability to resist politico-economic pressures. This is despite the majority of NGO staff in South Sudan being South Sudanese and, therefore, socially embedded in parts of South Sudanese society. International humanitarian organisations have also, at times, been closely entangled with warring parties in southern Sudan. This is not to suggest that the same cannot happen with South Sudanese NGOs, but that other actors in the aid sector have not been immune. This research moves beyond these assumptions to investigate actual relationships between South Sudanese NGOs and local authorities, including the strategies and social and political resources that NGOs draw upon to avoid pressure.

Secondly, there is an assumption that politics in South Sudan is only about a political contest between warring, polarised parties. This research also moves beyond this, paying attention to local contestations over authority in specific environments – which are often not primarily about control of national state structures. In South Sudan, as elsewhere in complex emergencies, there are numerous organisations that seek to build public authority and political power, and the realities of how authority is exercised varies from place to place. Therefore, South Sudanese NGOs have to navigate an environment where many different actors have power over their activities – allowing them to flourish or, conversely, ending their work. This means that South Sudanese NGOs must establish legitimacy simultaneously with many different actors. This can make it difficult to refuse the demands of various parties but, when these demands are contradictory, also forces constant compromises. As one interviewee from a South Sudanese NGO explained: *“If you don’t have a good relationship with all those people, it becomes very difficult. Even if you have a big money (huge funds).”* At the same time, South Sudanese NGOs use creative ways to uphold their own priorities despite external, competing pressures.

In global discussions about L/NNGOs, ‘legitimacy’ has often been discussed as if there was a fixed, absolute quality against which their conduct should be measured, and as if this could exist in a vacuum from surrounding dynamics. However, this misses the constant and contextual processes of legitimation that South Sudanese NGOs are constantly engaged in through their relationships with a range of actors, to establish the claims to authority essential for their survival.

⁶⁴ De Waal, A. ‘When Kleptocracy Becomes Insolvent: Brute causes of the civil war in South Sudan’. *African Affairs* 113, no. 452 (2014): 347–369. <https://academic.oup.com/afraf/article/113/452/347/78186>



5.1 NGOs as authorities

NGOs are critical vehicles for attracting resources to areas with highly limited employment opportunities, resources and services. This means that NGOs – whether South Sudanese or international – are an integral part of the local political economy, not only in the programmes that they explicitly deliver and report on, but also in the employment they provide and the additional services that they offer, such as internet access and flights. NGOs (including INGOs) are often the largest employers in an area and, during periods of government austerity, may offer the only reliably paid employment available. In some case study sites, salaries were the most significant financial support coming into the area by some margin. Most South Sudanese NGO staff support large networks of people through their salaries, so communities often see securing NGO salaries for their community as the most important resource from the aid sector, even more so than the intended aims of their programmes.

The staff of major South Sudanese NGOs play a significant role in brokering the flow of resources from the centre to more remote areas. This means they can themselves become powerful authorities, especially when NGOs, their salaries and their resources are a main resource in an area.

The education levels of South Sudanese NGO workers are part of their role in brokering resources and acting as interlocutors with the aid system. Many of the South Sudanese NGO workers interviewed had a relatively high level of education, were literate and could speak English well. This also sets them apart from most South Sudanese people. Very optimistic estimates still suggest that only a third of people in South Sudan are literate.⁶⁵ These rates are lower among women, and literacy levels in rural areas are also significantly lower than the national average. Also, many South Sudanese who are literate are literate in Arabic, not English, so cannot operate in the language of the NGO sector.

This difference between South Sudanese NGO workers and their communities is a feature that helps build their importance. The dominant language of the NGO sector in South Sudan is English, and this creates a barrier between this powerful sector and the community. South Sudanese who are able to speak the language and understand the practices of the aid sector provide their communities with potential interlocutors with international aid. In South Sudan, education has long provided opportunities for people to become interlocutors between the community and outside actors, including governments. Again, this go-between role is associated with building authority.

South Sudanese NGOs also gain acceptance and legitimacy by being seen as competent players. Competence does not only come from technical or even moral superiority, but also on having a ‘feel for the game’. This ‘feel for the game’ is about the unspoken, frequently informal rules governing the various spaces in which they must operate. This can range from greetings exchanged and food eaten, to expressing morally acceptable opinions such as attitudes to women or other ethnic groups. In reality, judgements of competence rely heavily on social indicators and being able to comply with implicit social cues. Like language, this provides a chance to be an interlocutor between communities and the aid sector, which have different social cues. South Sudanese NGOs workers must understand how to comply simultaneously with the rules of different games among the actors from which they seek legitimacy and support.

South Sudanese NGO leaders can gain authority through their NGOs, but these roles can make them subject to local criticism and questions of accountability. As one interviewee stated: *“I think the perception of the community towards this organisation is measured by the impact of what they do and first primarily by their interactions with the people.”* Communities and local authorities can have expectations of NGOs that are too unrealistic given the systematic financial and logistical challenges within which they have to operate. South

⁶⁵ UNESCO 2018.



Sudanese NGOs' funding is often significantly lower than that of international organisations but – particularly for larger, national NGOs that visibly resemble international agencies – they face high expectations of support, both from communities and local authorities. Indeed, many organisations – both national and subnational – described meeting these expectations as a key challenge, both in the quantity and the consistency of the support they can provide. As noted above, funding for South Sudanese NGOs is frequently short-term and project based; when funding ends, or during frequent gaps between projects, organisations struggle to maintain services. In some cases this can lead to challenges in relationships with communities and authorities when a project ends.

For example, one organisation's executive director said that: *"People see us, especially currently, as we are a fully-fledged organisation with full capacity to really deliver so much. But ... we are limited by the projects we have ... Sometimes the community come and say we need these interventions and you have no project to do that ... You have to know how to talk to the people, to do what you can and explain that there are things beyond your control."*

Since the 1990s, international and South Sudanese decision-makers have come to believe that humanitarian aid has created 'relief dependency' among South Sudanese communities. Aid delivered by South Sudanese NGOs would not be immune from these stereotyping perceptions.⁶⁶ However, as Thomas has demonstrated, these fears of relief dependency do not reflect reality. Even with the increased humanitarian response after December 2013, South Sudanese households do not rely on aid for the vast majority of their food: food aid across the population of South Sudan contributed about 13 per cent of household cereal supplies before harvest, and 6 per cent after harvest.⁶⁷ At the same time, prolonged experience of humanitarian

aid has increased communities' and public authorities' understanding and expectation of the aid system, and South Sudanese have incorporated the aid system into their strategies both for survival and for achieving their personal ambitions. These expectations extend to NGOs (both international and South Sudanese) and also to South Sudanese NGO employees.

There are strong incentives for South Sudanese NGOs to focus on humanitarian relief and service delivery over explicitly political, advocacy or governance-focused activities. This is partly because of donor priorities and the availability of funding for humanitarian relief, but can also be a strategic move in a context in which more adversarial activities might attract the ire of government. In spite of this, South Sudanese NGOs have historically been a channel for advocacy and political expression in a context of limited freedom of expression. Indeed, for some people, NGO work – including founding an NGO – is a way to gain political authority and influence. South Sudanese NGOs provide an opportunity to lobby donors and the aid system more effectively and to make demands for resources to fill geographic and sector gaps in aid. Leading a South Sudanese NGO can also provide an opportunity to demonstrate non-militarised forms of public authority in a context where many leaders and authority figures claim legitimacy through military experience.

⁶⁶ Kaler, A., and Parkins, J. (2012), 'Food, Donors, and Dependency Syndrome(s) in South Sudan'. *Sociology of Development*, 1, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 400-416.

⁶⁷ Thomas, E. 'Moving Towards Markets: Cash, commodification and conflict in South Sudan'. Rift Valley Institute, 2019, p.22.



In relation to this, the South Sudan NGO Forum and its associated clusters can be seen as important forums for advocacy and civic discussion in South Sudan. Important decisions are predominantly made in Juba-based clusters and the NGO Forum, which further exaggerates this centre-periphery dynamic. Although South Sudanese NGOs are increasingly present and vocal in clusters, it seems that the scale of these larger clusters has now forced decisions outside of these public meetings. Therefore, one result of making clusters more inclusive has been to push decision making into less visible and less South Sudanese spaces.

There are also more explicit connections between NGO work and political power, such as the movement of South Sudanese NGO founders into positions of government, and vice versa. NGO staff's life histories reveal significant overlap between government and NGO work. Some NGO workers previously held positions with local government, and in periods when donors supported NGO-government links (between the CPA and December 2013), some South Sudanese still held these positions in government while being on secondment to South Sudanese or international NGOs. At this time and with donor funding, NGOs (both South Sudanese and international) also seconded local staff to the government. Conversely, South Sudanese have left government jobs to work in NGOs when government salaries stopped being paid and when the government was not spending money on community services.

These movements between government and NGOs highlight the way that leadership of a South Sudanese NGO can be a potential source of individual legitimization. Following the 2005 CPA, as noted above, there was significant movement of NGO founders and leaders into government. Several research participants spoke about NGO work as a way of being able to become 'known' or make your name 'big'. Some NGO leaders were encouraged to move into politics after becoming known through their NGO work delivering services to their communities. South Sudanese NGO workers have also been known to enter local politics and become commissioners or other local government figures. This can place South Sudanese NGO figures in direct competition with current commissioners if South Sudanese NGO staff are seen as future rivals for the commissioner.

Seeking to gain authority through NGO work should not be viewed as nefarious or taboo. Gaining authority can allow an individual to advocate for greater resources to support their kin and wider communities, and even for them to advocate for humanitarian principles or a national vision of a political community and citizenship. Gaining authority through leadership of South Sudanese NGOs has the potential (if not always realised) of developing other avenues to gain power and legitimacy that are not limited to violent rebellion or significant, personal wealth.



Case study: the authority of NGO workers

This case study focuses on the experience of a South Sudanese man who works as a field administrator and logistics officer for a large South Sudanese NGO working in an SPLA-IO controlled rural area. Through his job, he has *de facto* power over the operations and budgets of the South Sudanese NGO in this area, which has no permanent international NGO presence and where this South Sudanese NGO has the most significant NGO compound.

His family has a long history in the area; he was born nearby and he can speak the local language fluently. He also had a network of friends and relatives there. However, he spent most of his childhood and adolescence in a Kenyan refugee camp. This allowed him to gain a secondary education, become familiar with the international humanitarian system and speak brilliant English. This made him distinct from almost everyone in his home area, where education rates are among the lowest in South Sudan. He only returned when he got a job for this NGO, and after his return, he married and brought his wife with him to help build a home among the community. Much of his motivation for employment was to gain a salary to support his mother and siblings; his brothers were participating in politics on both sides of the conflict but all lacked a regular salary. His NGO work brought him into daily conversations with many people and he quickly got to know a large number of the community. However, his return as a South Sudanese NGO employee both embedded him in and distanced him from the community. His control of the NGO compound gave him control of communication, internet and access to transport that most in the community would never have. Because the compound belonged to a South Sudanese NGO, he had more discretion than if he had worked for an INGO in terms of granting access to these resources. The internet in particular became seen as a public good provided by both the NGO and this logistics coordinator. The few educated youth in the area used the internet to access news, and many others in the community used the logistics coordinator's smartphone and internet to call family members across South Sudan, and in Sudan and East Africa.

5.2 Relationships with authorities: challenges and strategies

Since the 1990s, at the local level, South Sudanese NGOs' visible handling of significant resources, especially in times of government austerity, has effectively created an alternative set of local, powerful South Sudanese actors in their localities. The result, even if not intentional, is that NGOs become a challenge to the local government's ability to legitimate their own authority through providing services and controlling resources for public benefit. Local authorities seek to mitigate this dynamic through claiming credit for NGO activity and through trying to influence NGO spending in response to popular community demands.

Employment is one example. Local authorities, especially when they cannot provide significant, regular salaries for their own employees, may claim authority by trying to regulate and control NGO salaries. For example, when South Sudanese NGOs have failed to pay salaries on time, local authorities have acted as brokers between NGOs and communities. Some local authorities across South Sudan have also actively asserted that all NGOs should prioritise local employment whenever possible. On occasions, there have been accusations that local authorities have favoured certain individuals for NGO employment (as a reward for loyalty or as part of their patronage network), especially when they have no budget to employ them directly in government jobs. International and South Sudanese NGOs have sometimes succumbed to this pressure so that they can continue to operate in an area. In other cases this has caused disputes, sometimes leading to confrontation and evacuation, especially when



NGOs perceive that these pressures undermine their humanitarian programming and delivery of aid. However, this needs to be understood and addressed in the South Sudanese realities in which NGO salaries and, therefore, employment can be of paramount economic and political importance. These issues affect all NGOs in South Sudan, but South Sudanese NGOs may have less access to the UN to lobby for support in resisting these pressures. Some South Sudanese NGOs will comply with some demands for local employment, despite their financial predicaments, in order to show respect for local authorities and to build relationships with local authorities and the community.

Local authorities may also be unable to afford visible symbols of authority, such as cars and means of communication. It has long been seen in South Sudan that NGOs (including South Sudanese NGOs) have better access to signs of prestige, such as working vehicles, flights, Thuraya phones and salaries. NGOs' distribution of resources has allowed their staff members to build authority through this resource control, potentially creating antagonism with the local authority. As one South Sudanese NGO worker in Ganyiel commented, local authorities are 'vulnerable'. This has repeatedly brought tension between South Sudanese NGOs and local authorities, and on occasion some local authorities have explicitly accused national South Sudanese NGOs of misunderstanding their role. Many of these dynamics also exist with INGOs, but South Sudanese leadership of South Sudanese NGOs can make this competition more acute. As one local government official asserted: *"The national and local NGOs did not understand their role. They thought they were replacing the government. They are only supporting the government. In fact, they are doing the work of the government."*

These inequalities in NGO and local government funding are often most visible in access to transport. The regularity with which vehicles, and lifts in vehicles, are a point of contention between South Sudanese NGOs and local government highlights this tension. Since 2013 and the subsequent economic downturn, local government authorities have often lacked the resources to fund a working car. Since 2015 and the proliferation of states and counties, many commissioners do not even have a car and, sometimes, do not even have a motorbike. Even in crisis moments in the state, governors have had to beg South Sudanese NGOs and other local organisations, such as the church, for fuel to travel around their own state. Of course, many South Sudanese NGOs themselves lack easy access to transportation, but those that do have can easily appear to command more resources and power than local authorities. This is humiliating for local authorities.

At the same time, there are various ways in which local authorities exert control over NGOs operating in their area. INGOs and South Sudanese NGOs see it necessary to gain permission from local authorities to operate in their areas. NGOs regularly consult local authorities on the security situation. Local government authorities can also end up intentionally controlling where aid is placed, by controlling the movement of both national and international organisations. As one interviewee from a South Sudanese NGO described:

"We cannot go to the conflict affected areas without approval from security personnel. If they are not interested in the area, it takes days, months and years without getting clearance to visit, even if the people are suffering." These situations undermine the ability of INGOs and South Sudanese NGOs to provide needs-based humanitarian assistance.



Relationships with authorities vary from place to place, and even from NGO to NGO. While some describe interference and frustration, other NGOs report very positive and supportive relationships with local authorities. In various locations South Sudanese NGOs have been given land by local authorities. Authorities have, in some cases, intervened to help solve challenging issues; in one example, the Relief Organization for South Sudan (ROSS) and a local commissioner stepped in at the request of a local NGO to provide support during a complex reunification case. Some local government authorities have also dealt with internal disputes within South Sudanese NGOs. For example, during a contest over leadership of a South Sudanese NGO in a rural, SPLA-IO-controlled area, the competing leaders threatened to create clan-clan insecurity. Clan-clan revenge killings were already common in the area. The commissioner, and then governor, intervened to resolve the conflict.

However, all NGOs must navigate a precarious balance between cooperating and compromising with local authorities. Within these complex tensions around authority, South Sudanese NGOs draw on their own specific identities – local, South Sudanese and humanitarian – to negotiate space to operate. To build relationships with government, some South Sudanese NGOs have complied with local government requests for fuel or to give lifts to soldiers. Others told us that they would never do this because they adhere to humanitarian principles. Some even claim that giving lifts to community members who are ill would also violate NGO principles. These INGO norms of practice have not been developed from humanitarian principles and are driven by concerns for staff safety, but have sometimes been applied by South Sudanese NGOs as if they were a necessary marker of being a genuine NGO.

Some South Sudanese NGOs intentionally advocate to local authorities about the benefits of their programming, building their legitimacy by attracting resources to an area. As one South Sudanese NGO staff member in Wau described it: *“The first challenge we faced was that of the authorities. That is why we developed a strategy of involving them and making the topic so attractive that they even became willing to contribute to it.”* Some carefully ensure local authority visibility in their work so that their programming does not detract from government claims of legitimacy. Another strategy is to emphasise the organisation’s humanitarian identity through visible symbols (such as NGO identity cards or T-shirts), and through the way staff speak to authorities. As one NNGO worker described it: *“If you enter into the local authorities you make sure you talk light, like a neutral person. You cannot touch anything about politics or about the conflict, you just talk as a humanitarian person.”* This approach highlights that NGO workers are humanitarian and that they have to work under humanitarian principles. Because South Sudanese have four decades of experience of humanitarian aid, there is a broad understanding of these principles. This allows South Sudanese NGOs to avoid pressures to spend money on local authority-favoured ideas by explaining that funding for projects is conditional on humanitarian principles and needs-based assessments. For example, being an NGO worker has allowed South Sudanese to move between government and SPLA-IO controlled areas at times when most of the population could not move so freely.

Like local INGO staff, South Sudanese NGOs make use of local connections and being socially embedded to negotiate with local authorities. For example, being a ‘son of the soil’ or a ‘daughter of the land’ was seen as important in establishing local government relations. In an SPLA-IO-controlled area, an interviewee told how ROSS was much more willing to register South Sudanese NGOs from the local area, and not even charge for registration, in contrast to NGOs from other parts of South Sudan. An NGO founder working in Tochriak told how she was given land from the local government authority because she was from the area.



The benefits of being socially embedded are also visible in negotiations at the national level. For example, a large South Sudanese NGO with offices in Juba but implementing in SPLA-IO controlled areas became subject to accusations in Juba that they were aligned to the SPLA-IO. Staff used personal relationships within the army and the very highest ranks of government to resolve these issues peacefully.

One challenge faced by South Sudanese NGOs (and international actors) is that donors' demands and expectations of NGO relationships with local authorities have changed over time. When South Sudanese NGOs first gained donor support in the late 1990s, this was through programmes that had SPLA support and at a time when there was a close donor-SPLA relationship (despite occasional, significant disagreements). The USA at the time was a major donor and was also seen to be supporting the SPLA in national peace negotiations. In the post-CPA era, there was pressure for NGOs to work with and through government as donors sought to support the building of the nascent state of South Sudan. The outbreak of conflict in December 2013 brought an overnight shift in the approach of some donors towards government, transforming official perceptions of the South Sudan government from incapable but well intentioned to malign and kleptocratic. The outbreak of violence in Juba was blamed on the South Sudanese elites in the warring parties. There were reasonable fears that any support to governments might end up being used to fund further armed conflict. Even for donors who took a more nuanced approach, the new humanitarian funding context meant that relations with government were seen as a potentially dangerous violation of humanitarian principles. While there is an understandable need for donors to be responsive to context, it was often left to implementing partners –

the NGOs on the ground – to communicate these shifting stances and renegotiate with local government authorities at a local level in their day-to-day work. Even everyday requests started to lead to significant tension. For example, in one rural area now controlled by the SPLA-IO, donors had (before 2013) given funding to NGOs to support local government communications by providing radios and Thurayas, despite ongoing, significant armed conflict. Suddenly, after 2013, NGOs were refusing to allow commissioners to charge their phones because it could violate humanitarian principles. This proved complicated for all NGOs.

In another example, in one rural area outside of Wau, in the post-CPA era, there was a large, multi-year and multi-million euro project being implemented by international and national NGOs. One objective was to support local government capacity and, as part of this arrangement, assets were given to the local government at the end of the project. Then one of these national NGOs received funding for another project that did not require them to give their assets to the local government when it ended. The local government initially demanded their vehicles and motorcycles. As the South Sudanese NGO explained: *"When the project finished, we were having a very high tension with the government because the government says 'since the project finishes, there is not any reason for [the NGO] to possess these assets.' And we, on the other side say 'no, even if our project is finished, the fact remains that these assets still belong to [the NGO], till we secure funds in future'."* The South Sudanese NGO only managed to resolve the issue by using its own contacts and appealing to the governor and security advisor to stop these demands on its assets.



Case study: the genesis and downfall of a women's association

All NGOs, ultimately, depend on the cooperation of local authorities for their continued operation in a particular area. The challenges that authorities can present are illustrated by the example of a women's association in a relatively remote, currently opposition-controlled area. The organisation was founded in the early 1990s by a woman from the area who had lived for several years in a refugee camp, where she was active in church groups and supervised food distributions. When she returned to this area in southern Sudan there were no humanitarian activities. She founded a women's association and organised members to construct a set of tukuls (huts) and a dining room which could then be rented to visiting NGOs requiring accommodation or meeting space. An international organisation donated money for mattresses, bed sheets and mosquito nets; another provided funding for bed- and table-making. This business provided the women's association with a constant income and it was able to employ security guards and cooks, and pay incentives to the heads of eight affiliated women's groups (for which the women's association was an umbrella body). The association also supported vulnerable people and was recognised by the local commissioner, who invited it to participate in government functions.

However, at the end of 2007, the commissioner was removed and replaced. The new local authority decided to construct a chiefs' office in the women's compound and demolished their tukuls without compensation. The founder felt that the men may have been angered by the success of the women's association. Frustrated, she left Akobo and stayed in Juba for a year. She has more recently founded a new organisation to support women widowed during the recent conflict but, without any external support, has not yet been able to initiate any income-generating activities.

5.3 The humanitarian system and local political economies

As described above, donors' and INGOs' intermittent funding of South Sudanese NGOs, as well as their inconsistent expectations of NGO–government relations, add to the complex dynamics of the South Sudanese political economy. International naivety about the public authority of NGOs (including INGOs), the importance of salaries, and the poverty and potential humiliation of local authorities can also contribute to unrealistic expectations of all NGOs operating in South Sudan. The problem with unrealistic expectations is that they prevent an honest conversation about where lines should be drawn in terms of local authority demands, and force NGO staff (of both INGOs and South Sudanese NGOs) to conceal some of the everyday compromises they make to appease local authorities and communities.

The current humanitarian system is also further entrenching Juba-centric dynamics among South Sudanese NGOs, which mimics the centre-periphery dynamics in South Sudan's political economy. There have been accusations that development of the centre has meant neglecting development and resources in the periphery. The government and donors' effective centralisation of the aid system in Juba reinforces these centre-periphery grievances by centralising humanitarian power and resources.

The government registration system is one way in which South Sudanese NGOs feel the significance of Juba. Donor funding is often conditional on registration, which requires interaction between South Sudanese NGOs and the South Sudanese government, because national NGOs must register with the government in Juba. This national registration has a central place in the autobiographical histories of many South Sudanese NGO founders, highlighting how important this formal government recognition is seen to be. Registering in Juba was also closely connected



with progression from a local to a national NGO. Registration is a necessity in order to apply for funding, as is being able to operate in Juba. However, even when registration had not led to funding, registration in itself was still described as a significant achievement. This formal registration often involved significant financial investments: people invested hundreds of US dollars in registration fees each year and additional thousands in employing lawyers to facilitate the process. Many described it as a complex process that involved finding someone who knew the system. This process and its importance to South Sudanese NGO histories further highlights the centrality of Juba for South Sudanese NGOs.

The 2016 NGO Act, which amended previous, formal regulation of NGOs, upheld NGOs' need to register and created a legal framework for a high level of government monitoring of NGOs. The Act has been a concern for donors, INGOs and South Sudanese NGOs in Juba but less so for those outside. South Sudanese NGOs interviewed in this research almost never explicitly mentioned this Act, although they noted procedural changes, and there were rare expressions of concern. One person complained that South Sudanese NGOs now had to re-register and report annually, making this a hurdle too high for many. The general lack of explicit concern with the Act may have been caused by a lack of awareness of these debates outside of Juba, but it might also be explained by a pre-existing situation in which a high level of government monitoring was already the practice. Either way, it highlights that the political concerns of humanitarians within and outside Juba can be diverge significantly.



6 Conclusions and recommendations

At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, donors and humanitarian organisations agreed to the Grand Bargain, a set of commitments aimed at reforming the sector. These included commitments to create a more supportive ecosystem for local and national responders. In South Sudan, there have been some activities aimed at improving the quality of funding and support, but progress against the agreed targets is limited. Armed conflict has made it difficult to implement these localisation agendas, despite an increasing reliance on local and national organisations to deliver substantive humanitarian programmes in areas that are risky and hard to access.

The purpose of this research was to explore these tensions through an in-depth study of the realities and histories of South Sudanese NNGOs. The research addressed eight questions (see Annex 1) that sought to understand how the sector has evolved in South Sudan, how South Sudanese NGOs relate to other organisations, political authorities and the communities they support, and how they manage funding constraints and challenges. It is accompanied by a short policy paper that addresses the implications of the findings for donors in South Sudan.

6.1 The evolution of the NGO sector

The report documents how the NGO sector has been shaped by major political events and complex emergencies that have resulted in severe and protracted crises over recent decades. NGOs became active in Southern Sudan from the 1970s, but a significant

cohort of South Sudanese NGOs emerged in the 1990s during OLS – an aid operation responding to the wars and famines of the 1980s and 1990s. In recent years, international reliance on South Sudanese NGOs has continued to rise in times of crisis, especially to cope with the high risks that appear during complex emergencies. For example, the number of South Sudanese NGOs registered as members of the South Sudan NGO Forum has grown from 92 in 2012 to 263 in 2019.

The evolution and growth of the NGO sector has been shaped by donor priorities, founder motivations and geographical constraints. There have been repeated shifts in focus from ‘relief’ to ‘development’ and back again, including as far back as OLS. Organisational histories collected during this study illustrate that founders start NGOs for many reasons: among them, to fill particular gaps and channel resources to particular under-served locations or needs, or because of a lack of alternative ways to instigate change within their local or national-level communities.

Once started, the motivation, charisma and capabilities of these individuals are an important driver for establishing an organisation’s reputation and for its growth. Some have been able to prove themselves, building trust and reputation, becoming well known, well-resourced and influential humanitarian actors. Others struggled to get off the ground or to survive changes in context. Growing an NGO is easier for some than others: women founders are less likely to possess the social, economic and political capital that would give them a springboard to establishing a successful or large-scale NGO. The relative absence of women from leadership of South Sudanese NGOs



further entrenches gender inequalities. Non-humanitarian organisations and organisations without a presence in Juba also face particular challenges. These findings have clear implications for the way that current funding environments create the conditions that enable certain types of organisations to contribute to humanitarian operations.

6.2 Principles and dynamics

The research questions sought to understand how the South Sudanese NGO sector interacts with other organisations, initiatives, authorities and communities, how local and national organisations are perceived by these groups, and what are the risks and benefits that result. The report emphasises the variety of organisations that exist and, as such, cautions against generalisation.

An important theme is that the centralisation of the humanitarian system in Juba results in a funding bias towards organisations that are able to establish a presence and build connections in the capital. This plays into centre-periphery dynamics and a sense of frustration among non-Juba based organisations and communities. In part, this contributes to the common aspiration among South Sudanese organisations to become 'national' and establish a presence in the capital. The aspiration to become 'national' also includes ambitions to support South Sudan-wide communities and identities, and to apply non-partisan humanitarian principles. Donors and international actors need to think critically about the political geographies and experiences of marginalisation that are reinforced by their norms of operation in South Sudan: continued and increased investment in understanding the country's complex, local political economic dynamics is essential to their capacity to make informed judgements about political relationships.

The political and economic environments navigated by South Sudanese NGOs are much more complex than a simple binary between warring parties would suggest. South Sudanese NGOs have to navigate the demands of many different actors who all have the power to allow them to flourish or to end their work. To do this, South Sudanese NGOs must simultaneously establish legitimacy with various actors. As with all NGOs, they often act as public authorities and the line between the aid sector and politics in South Sudan has been blurred by leaders moving between the two. However, many founders are also motivated to create non-partisan forms of public authority that avoids the more predatory logics of government. Future research could usefully explore broader South Sudanese perceptions of the forms of authority that emerge through South Sudanese NGOs. It would be useful to ask whether alternative visions of political communities have been formed, and how NGO work by INGOs and South Sudanese NGOs contributes to emerging ideas of citizenship and reconciliation.

It was not possible to conduct extensive consultations with communities within the scope of this study. However, the research has questioned common assumptions around legitimacy and has highlighted the way that access to, and knowledge of, particular locations varies between organisations. The role of South Sudanese NGOs as brokers of resources, services, communications and employment opportunities also varies. As frontline responders, it is often South Sudanese NGOs that are held responsible for and face the brunt of blame by local communities and authorities for shifts in humanitarian programming. This is despite these South Sudanese NGOs often being the least influential organisations in the South Sudan humanitarian system.



There is more to be understood about the complex interaction between humanitarian activities, peacebuilding activities, and how local level peace is sustained or undermined. Future work should also investigate the private sector's relationship with South Sudanese NGOs, and aim to understand how South Sudanese NGOs differ from INGOs in the way they engage with the private sector. We know that some founders of South Sudanese NGOs have gained funding as employees or business owners in the private sector. However, this study did not discuss broader dynamics between South Sudanese NGOs and the private sector (including South Sudanese and non-South Sudanese businesses).

6.3 Risk and revenue

The final questions sought to understand how South Sudanese NGOs survive and sustain themselves. The report reinforces other work that shows how donor funding has significantly shaped South Sudanese NGO experiences. Donors and INGOs have worried about South Sudanese NGOs' entanglement in wartime political economies, and their lack of will or ability to prevent humanitarian resources being captured by the warring parties. They have distrusted founders' motivations and have struggled to know whether L/NGOs can be trusted when conflicts have polarised people and when warring parties depend on capturing resources to fund the conflict. To mitigate risks to themselves, donors and international organisations may require pre- or co-financing or limit the length of projects. However, unpredictable funding and poor contracting practices make it difficult to build and maintain humanitarian institutions.

This means that it is NGO leaders and staff who absorb high levels of economic and security risk, and this can lead to significant moral problems. Risks are exacerbated by a funding environment that increases risk-taking behaviour and can result in profound issues around risk transference, including a lack of resourcing for security, insurance and evacuation. Furthermore, the willingness of many local and national humanitarians to

'stay and deliver' has been well documented. However, this can lead to their leaders and international partners placing undue expectations on their teams, which can leave staff vulnerable and uninsured. The aid sector in South Sudan should critically reflect on the ethical assumptions that are made in relation to the safety and risk of various actors and organisations in the system.

This report has also highlighted how short-term, pre-financing funding mechanisms and other norms of humanitarian aid can make lack of trust a self-fulfilling prophecy. Intermittent funding and pre-financing make it very difficult for South Sudanese NGOs to operate in an open and predictable manner, leading to precarious financial arrangements that have to be constantly juggled. Sometimes funding goes astray for malign reasons, but sometimes it just becomes less visible as South Sudanese NGOs try to find the pre-financing for one project from another project. This creates distrust in South Sudanese NGOs. Short-term and unpredictable funding also increases the risks faced from communities and local authorities, as South Sudanese NGO workers are left to explain inconsistencies and shortfalls in service provision to communities.

Nevertheless, the research documents the ways in which national NGOs express their agency, including motivations, coping mechanisms and activities that go beyond the international effort. There is a significant amount of voluntary labour, alternative revenue-generating activities including renting out meeting halls or guesthouse space, making and selling goods or food, or conducting activities that require little or no funding. There are also occasions when donor funding has allowed South Sudanese NGOs to invest in assets and core capacity that allow them to develop strong reputations and a longevity that far outlives specific project funding. Facilitating a stronger, more resilient and more diverse ecosystem of South Sudanese NGOs requires donors to invest in understanding how they influence the local organisational landscape and to address system-wide incentives.



6.4 Recommendations

The research makes the following key recommendations, which are articulated greater detail in an accompanying policy paper.

Donors and other Grand Bargain signatories in South Sudan should:

- 1 Restate their commitment to supporting South Sudanese organisations in South Sudan, clarifying the aims of the commitments in their work and identifying priority areas.
- 2 Develop systems which are able to track funds distributed to South Sudanese NGOs. There is also a need to develop interim targets and pilots that are substantive enough to test how and whether localisation achieves its stated aims and to facilitate mutual trust building. These should be complemented by initiatives that facilitate political oversight of spending, including a proportional increase into research initiatives to understand risks, such as the tiered due diligence initiative at the Start Network.
- 3 Invest in longer-term commitments to South Sudanese NGOs that provide predictability in funding and include support for administrative capacity. This must include reviewing contracts with grantees including UN agencies and INGOs around the length of funding and quality of subcontracting relationships. For example, insisting that indirect costs are provided to downstream partners at the same percentage as first tier partners receive would make a significant difference to South Sudanese organisations.
- 4 Develop specific support mechanisms to facilitate inclusion of South Sudanese NGOs founded by groups with low social, economic and political capital, including women's associations and organisations.

- 5 Decentralise pooled funding decisions to avoid skewing the system and increasing over-reliance on Juba. OCHA sub-national offices might also play a greater role in convening, engaging, and supporting more local actors.
- 6 Consider the reputational and security risks taken on by South Sudanese organisations and incentivise their major suppliers to provide for the safety of their subcontractors' staff. Donors and contracting agencies must also work together to ensure that affordable and accessible insurance and evacuation services are made available to downstream partners.

Annex 1: Detailed methodology

This research was commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) South Sudan. The objectives for this study, as set out in the terms of reference (TOR) for the research provided by DFID, were:

- a) To better understand the historical, political, social, geographical and ethnic dynamics of national and local NGOs and how these influence their operating principles, particularly in relation to humanitarian response; including a deeper understanding of how they have developed institutionally.
 - i) This should also include how national and local NGOs navigate conflict within the context of their day-to-day operations.
- b) To understand the extent to which national and local NGOs influence or are being influenced by the external environment including:
 - i) How they engage within national and subnational political economies, and how the engagement shapes their institutional and programming decisions, particularly in relation to humanitarian assistance and protection.



- ii) How national and local NGOs are perceived by local actor and populations, the focus being on specific local (formal and informal) authorities; faith-based organisations; communities; private sector; opposition actors and national government.
- c) Based on the findings, to identify the implications on DFID South Sudan's engagement strategy with local and national humanitarian actors and the localisation agenda in South Sudan.

The research questions included in the TOR for this study were:

- 1 How has the national NGO sector evolved since 2005 in terms of number and size of organisations, thematic focus and activities (eg, service delivery vs advocacy)?
- 2 In what ways do local and national NGOs interact with national and subnational political economies and how does this differ for local NGOs as compared to national NGOs? What are the key sector-specific risks that exist when engaging with them?
- 3 What are the main revenue streams of local and national NGOs? How do they pre-finance, fundraise and sustain their activities? In what ways does donor funding risk undermining the leadership, governance and sustainability of local and national NGOs? Are there examples of how this risk is being mitigated effectively?
- 4 What are the underlying geographical, ethnic and political dynamics of the growth of the national NGO sector, and how have these evolved since 2005?
- 5 How does the national NGO sector interact with other institutions, such as the church and other faith-based organisations, communities, local authorities, national government and the private sector? How does this support or hinder their role in relation to humanitarian response and protection at the local level?
- 6 In what ways do local and national NGOs engage with, facilitate and sustain local-level peace deals? Does this enhance or conflict with humanitarian agendas?
- 7 How are local and national NGOs perceived by the Government of South Sudan, particularly from a state regulatory perspective, and other opposition actors? How do local communities perceive local and national NGOs? How does this differ for local NGOs as compared national NGOs?
- 8 How do local and national NGOs understand, interpret and apply humanitarian principles in the South Sudanese context? How does this manifest in the humanitarian responses of local and national NGOs? What are the pros and cons of working with local and national responders? How does this differ for local NGOs as compared national NGOs?

Primary data collection

This study primarily utilised new qualitative, in-depth data that builds on but goes beyond previous research.⁶⁸

The research was carried out by a 12-person research team led by the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa (FLCA) at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Eight members of the team were South Sudanese. Four were from the UK, though with significant experience of living and working in South Sudan. In each case study site, data was collected by one early career researcher from the area, and one senior researcher. Interviews were almost always conducted one-on-one. In some cases the interviewee was already known to the interviewer, and other cases not. Six members of the team have previously worked for national or international organisations in South Sudan, and one currently works for a national organisation. The research team therefore brought together individuals with a range of positionalities.

⁶⁸ This methodology drew on key ideas from the methodological design of Alice Robinson's ongoing doctoral research.



The team conducted 105 semi-structured, oral history interviews with South Sudanese NGO staff, covering individuals from a wide range of organisations. We sought to include organisations that varied in a number of ways, including in size, thematic focus, faith-based and non-faith based, how long ago they were founded, area of origin, registration status (for example, not registered, registered at state level, registered at national level) and whether or not they have a presence in Juba. We actively sought to include newly formed organisations, organisations that do not receive international funding and organisations that have ceased to operate. We also actively sought to include women-led organisations at different levels. Many of the organisations interviewed were registered NGOs, though some smaller, non-registered associations were also interviewed. We also interviewed individuals from organisations which had closed or become dormant. Interviews were conducted with a range of individuals differently positioned within organisations, including founders, executive directors, case workers, programme, admin and finance staff and area coordinators, as well as former staff. Interviewees were identified through the researchers' networks, snowballing (with interviewees suggesting further participants), and through lists of NGOs operating in a particular area where available. A small number of interviewees were identified online and contacted through websites and public email addresses. We purposively sought out interviewees who would allow us to engage with a wide range of organisations in each location, as described above.

Primarily using interview data, detailed organisational histories were developed. In each site we sought to include a mix of associations, subnational and national NGOs with varying degrees of longevity. These organisational histories were based on interviews with several different staff members at different positions in the organisation, and sometimes included interviews in different locations (for example in a case study site and in Juba). Condensed versions of some of these organisational histories are included in this report as case studies, though details have been removed to preserve anonymity.

The life history method was selected for a number of reasons. Since many South Sudanese NGOs were formed relatively recently, the life history approach allowed an exploration of a longer history, considering individuals' life stories prior to founding or joining national NGOs. Secondly, by focusing on individual life histories, we were able to understand the experiences and relationships that transcend individual organisations, and the motivations and turning points that lead to and inform the founding and development of an NGO.

Additionally, 66 key informant interviews were conducted with a range of actors, to deepen our understanding of the historical development and contemporary characteristics of South Sudanese NGOs in each area and to understand how they engage with and are perceived by others. This included interviewees from international NGOs, UN agencies and the Red Cross/Red Crescent movement, local authorities including representatives from the South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) and ROSS, community leaders, church representatives and business owners or traders.

Six focus group discussions were conducted. These included two in Ganyliel (two groups of six people), two in Yambio (two groups of five people) and two in Wau (two groups of six people). Focus groups were conducted separately with men and women. The Wau area focus groups were held in Luonyaker, with the aim of gaining a more rural perspective, and were selected based on boma locations and to include people who had participated in NGO activities to varying extents. In Yambio and Ganyliel, focus group participants were members of local associations (primarily women's and youth associations) which helped to identify participants. Finally, a three-day peace conference organised partly by South Sudanese NGOs was observed in Wau, with speeches recorded (with permission) and follow-up interviews conducted with participants, and a food distribution was observed in Ganyliel.



Table 1: Summary of type of data collected in each location

	Akobo	Ganyliel	Juba	Tochriak	Wau	Yambio	Overall total
Life history interviews	12	12	27	5	27	22	105
Key informant interviews	26	11	8	3	9	9	66
Focus group discussions	0	2	0	0	2	2	6
Total interviews	38	25	35	8	38	33	177

The total number of people consulted for the research is 205. This includes 105 consulted through life history interviews, 66 through key informant interviews, and 34 through the six focus group discussions. Although

we consciously sought to include women in the research and particularly women-led organisations, the vast majority of interviews conducted (151 of 205) were with men.

Table 2: Total number of people consulted (including focus groups)

	Akobo	Ganyliel	Juba	Tochriak	Wau	Yambio	Overall total
Female participants	3	10	12	2	10	17	54
Male participants	35	25	23	6	36	26	151
Total interviews	38	35	35	8	46	43	205

Interviews were primarily carried out in locations selected by the interviewee (this was often their office). The majority of interviews and FGDs were recorded, translated (if not in English) and fully transcribed. In cases where recording was felt to be too sensitive, detailed notes were taken during the interview and later typed up. Given the sensitivity of the operating environment, interviews were conducted anonymously and the names of organisations are not included in this report.

Short, written case studies were developed for each location and the research team came together for an analysis workshop in Juba in September 2019 at which cross-case comparisons were explored and key findings were discussed and developed. Transcribed interviews were coded in NVivo. The report was externally reviewed by two individuals contracted through the research team, and one through DFID.



Literature review

The literature review was limited to papers published in English after 1990. Papers were identified through a search of online databases and a snowball search, including footnotes and bibliographies of reviewed papers and literature already known to the research team. The methodology of each paper was reviewed and key findings were drawn out in relation to the research questions. In total 50 papers were reviewed, 37 of which were South Sudan-specific and 13 of which explored relevant research from other areas for the purposes of comparison.

Annex 2: Literature reviewed and referenced

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This report examines findings from the research project 'Historical and Political Dynamics of the NGO Sector in South Sudan' at the Centre for Public Authority and International Development, hosted by the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa.

If you would like to learn more about the research project please contact **N.R.Pendle@lse.ac.uk**

You can find out more about the project's findings at the address below.

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