



# THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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## Policy Brief

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### *The State of the South Sudanese National Unity*

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#### **Summary**

- *This paper discusses the state of South Sudan's national unity. Our insights are based on interviews conducted with the members of parliament, representatives of women and youth, civil society organizations, intellectuals, and representatives of political parties residing in Juba, South Sudan.*
- *Most of the respondents look at national unity as a sense of common purpose, a sense of justice, and a sense of feeling included and benefiting from the state.*
- *However, 75% of the respondents suggested that South Sudan currently suffers the absence of national unity; this results from prevailing lack of a sense of common purpose, justice, and inclusive and functioning social contract between the state and the people. This prompts a call on state authorities to recognize this reality as the first step towards fixing the broken national fabric.*
- *The respondents equally recognize elements of national unity as equitable distribution of resources and power and equal protection of citizens before the law. They emphasize the need for strong legal institutions, respect for the rule of law, and safety of citizens anywhere in the country as some of the pillars for national unity. One respondent puts it succinctly, stating, "unity is strong when citizens are not complaining about how unfairly they are being treated, when there is a feeling of oneness, and when there is peaceful co-existence among different communities".*
- *Equally, our respondents believe in a strong unifying national army that everybody identifies with as a vanguard of sustainable unity. They also identify forgiveness, repentance, healing, and reconciliation as critical elements for nurturing national unity.*
- *Many respondents named the flag, national anthem, coat of arms, national army, the presidency, the constitution and national parliament as symbols of national unity. They also believe that political leadership that demonstrates responsibility and cares for the welfare of all the citizens can symbolize national unity.*
- *Lastly, respondents consider a number of factors as responsible for the break down of national unity in South Sudan. These include: abuse of power, improper interpretation of the constitution, poor decision-making, poor management of resources and lack of a cohesive national vision. One respondent particularly laments what they refer to as corrupt agents running the system and constantly altering rules to fit the interest of a few, as responsible for the breakdown of national unity in the country.*

## 1 Introduction

The people of South Sudan, who, in millions, voted in 2011 to establish an independent country as an expression of their collective will and determination, now face enormous threats to their unity<sup>1</sup>. Ever since the outbreak of the violent conflict in 2013, the landscape in South Sudan has not been the same. The conflict has created very bitter divisions and experiences that have had cracking and shattering effect on the social glue of this nation. The crisis that started initially as a leadership contest within the SPLM Party was completely mismanaged and it degenerated into a violent conflict. The conflict violently spilled into both military and ethnic spaces. Evidently, political leaders successfully used the military and ethnic affiliations as tools to settle political scores. This unfortunately explains the penchant for the armed elements to target civilians along ethnic lines at the beginning of the conflict, especially in 2013 and 2014. That the citizens would feel unsafe in certain parts of their own country because of belonging to a certain ethnicity, speaks to the fact that South Sudanese have rapidly lost the sense of national unity. This begs the questions: why have things gotten to this point so rapidly? Why has a nation that appeared robustly united (Baubock, 2002) during the referendum and independence become so divided in a rather short period? What do the South Sudanese think is the reason for this state of affairs? Above all, why is unity necessary?

There is limited, if any, literature, on these important questions as far as South Sudan is concerned. Thus, attempts to stabilize the nascent state demand that these questions be adequately ascertained. This policy brief; therefore, explores such questions and concludes with policy-oriented advice. We conducted interviews with members of parliament, representatives of women and youth, civil society organizations, intellectuals and representatives of political parties mostly living in Juba and limited number in Northern Bahr el Ghazal and sought their views on national unity concept, and how it is engendered or sustained. There are two motivations to focusing on these groups of people. First, this sets a useful point of departure into a greater debate respecting the country's desired system of governance, which bears substantially on national cohesion. Finally, most governance decisions are propagated and made in major cities where the elite class resides. This analysis brings the conversation closer to those who have for the last decade been responsible for what seems like a failed state and nation-building project. We hope that answering the above questions lends essential insights into generating strategic public policy direction that would help promote national unity, the result of which would be stable South Sudan. Forging national unity is the primarily responsibility of any state and government, an obligation that weighs down heavily on the political leadership and political class as well as the broader citizenry.

### 1.1 Conceptualizing National Unity

National unity is a process and cannot be achieved in a short span of time. It is formed through a strong state that administers justice fairly, shares resources equitably, and protects citizens equally. However, state formation, upon which these principles rest, has proved difficult in the country, which demonstrates why national unity has suddenly become shaky, the result being an

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incredibly polarized South Sudanese society. Many factors can be blamed for the present situation, including, among other things, lack of strategic and collective leadership, past injustices that have not been resolved, many years of marginalization by the Sudanese state, weak institutions to manage political competition, lack of broader understanding of the state and its purpose, and internationalization and regionalization of the South Sudanese internal processes. For any nation to be stable, its people must be united and share a common sense of belonging (Berry, 1974). According to prior scholarship as we survey below, when people cease to have a common sense of identity, national unity also ceases to exist and without national unity, the nation, as a holder of nationalities, ceases to exist.

In order to properly drive this point home, it is necessary to revisit the concept of state and why societies find it the more useful way to organize. The ancient Greeks, who were among the first to organize socially/politically in what were called city-states, believed that the purpose of the state was to promote self-sufficiency<sup>2</sup>. State exists to provide for its citizens all that is necessary for their highest development and happiness. (Bentham, 2015)) expands on this to suggest that the purpose of the state is the promotion of the “greatest happiness for the greatest number of people”. According to Plato (360 B.C.E), the state is regarded as an organism that is well developed to provide a space for individuals and communities. According to Aristotle, a state and political society exist for the sake of noble actions and not for mere companionship. For Rousseau, the state is not just a mere matter of convenience for the gaining of utilitarian ends, but also the highest expression of the best of man. Hobbes, father of social contract, said the state exists to guarantee basic security for all citizens and in exchange, the citizens give up the right to do whatever pleases them. Fukuyama summarizes what motivates societies to organize through the state, stating that, “the real driver of state formation is violence or the threat of violence, making social contract an efficient rather than a final cause” (Fukuyama, 2011, p83).

Reflecting on Fukuyama’s view of state formation, one finds an element of appeal in people trying to organize through the state for fear of violence or having been coerced violently to accept a certain political order. This certainly rings a bell in the case of South Sudan. The people of South Sudan, since time immemorial, have been exposed to violent aggressions in the Nile Valley, pushing them out of the modern day Egypt to the Sudan where they accepted to organize the ancient states, including the Kingdoms of Makuria and Cush (Kirwan, 1980; Godlewski, 2013). Pressures from external forces continued to expose them to violence until the fall of Cush and their migration to the modern day South Sudan. Violent aggression continued through the slave trade, colonial state, and even after the independence of the Sudanese state. These violent episodes compelled the people of South Sudan to unite and oppose successfully a violent oppression, a pursuit of which culminated in independence in 2011.

As seen from the foregoing narrative, unity is both a defining feature of state and a necessity to guarantee basic security for all. If Bentham’s view on the state as a promotion of greatest happiness for the greatest number of people is acceptable, then citizens in each state must be united and work for a common purpose in order to ensure greatest happiness. Furthermore, if the state is unable to promote “the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people”, it follows that the state would be rendered immaterial. It seems happiness cannot be guaranteed when citizens fight internally or when external forces are able to interfere with internal peace or

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<sup>2</sup> See Political Theory by Eddy Asirvatham

when the state is unable to guarantee basic security for all citizens. Logic would suggest that when citizens are left in a predicament of ineffective state, they would choose other modes of social organization to seek similar benefits, a process that may disrupt internal unity and effectively weaken their ability for sustained happiness. Viewed from social contract perspective, state is premised on the unity of the greatest number of people because it has the best chance of guaranteeing basic security and ensuring happiness. This effectively answers the question of whether unity is a necessity because without it, it would seem impossible to organize societies in form of states.

What seems also self-evident is the fact that unity of the greatest number of people cannot be achieved without guarantees to manage elements of diversity because by definition, unity suggests the coming together of parts. And so for any state to ensure happiness for its citizens, they must all feel the worth of their unity under the state; otherwise, it would be difficult for those who feel marginalized to experience any happiness. A state with divided nationalities essentially falters. This is the context in which the concept of national unity should be appraised.

In light of the foregoing philosophical understanding of the state and unity, it is important to assess what the South Sudanese understand about unity and its necessity. The authors of this piece embarked upon a research project in June and July 2016 to assess the views of the South Sudanese on four governance areas: 1) the system of government, 2) constitution making process, 3) resource sharing, and 4) national unity, all within the context of the proposed federal arrangement in the Peace Agreement. Altogether, we interviewed 82 individuals, summarizing below the results, particularly on national unity.

## **2 Materials and Results**

### **2.1 South Sudanese Views on the Concept of National Unity**

As a measure to assess people's understanding of national unity, respondents are asked what national unity means to them. For many respondents, national unity basically means having a national identity that is consistent with the constitution and that embodies how well people feel as part of a nation state. To some, unity is all about togetherness and sharing common goals, including living in one geographical entity that is diverse, but also possesses a sense of common identity. Other respondents think it is a feeling that one belongs to South Sudan and if one goes to any state, one should live there without fear of discrimination. For some respondents, national unity involves sharing of resources and ideas, shared decision-making, and being fairly represented in local and state affairs. It means the ability of citizens from the grassroots to come together to work for a common purpose. It is accepting one another and getting inspired by one another. "It is a sense of belonging regardless of tribe or otherwise."

Some respondents provide specifics in what they believe promotes national unity. They think that national unity is expressed through, among other things, civil service arrangements. Civil servants like doctors, teachers, accountants, engineers and teachers, to this effect, should serve in all states and counties of South Sudan without regard to origin and political affiliation. A number of respondents believe that national unity means a good system of government and justice for all. It means having a sense of dependence on each other as a people under one nation state. National unity is when people from different perspectives see each other as having a common

destiny and fate with a sense of national values and ideals that are collectively developed through national consensus or dialogue.

A question that follows underlies whether respondents believe there is national unity in South Sudan and 75% of them said South Sudanese are not united at the moment. A third question the respondents answered concerns what they think are the most important elements of national unity. In response, respondents believe that equitable distribution of resources, equal protection of citizens under the law and a sense of nationalism are critical elements of national unity. As well, people's sense of belonging to a society results from a state that does not arbitrarily arrest, detain or blacklist citizens. Furthermore, some respondents believe that forgiveness or simply saying sorry to one another as a people can promote national cohesion. Citizenry respect by the state, especially that of the constitution, is paramount.

Lack of a merit-based system of employment threatens South Sudanese sense of oneness. As the country gets increasingly polarized, civil service reform is critically desired. Investment in human capital growth needs anchoring on people's unity. As such, national educational programs that prioritize boarding schools that embrace diversity and instill in the students a sense of civic duty, are required. Other programs include national markets that encourage border trade and national youth service, which fosters an appreciation for national service among young people. Lastly, important in the list of factors that the respondents present are transparency and accountability in the administration of the rule of law and resources allocation.

As a way to push the thoughts of respondents further, we ask them how they could tell if national unity is strong? One respondent says the following: "If citizens all feel safe to live and work anywhere in South Sudan and not fear being attacked or discriminated, then we know that national unity is strong." Others suggest that stronger national unity exists when there is a greater degree of self-expression or freedom of expression without fear of retribution. For some respondents, national unity hinges on improved food security and adequate provision of social services. For others, it is the ability of the state to provide transportation infrastructure, strong legal institutions, respect for the constitution, and fostering of good governance. One respondent says national unity is strong, "when we are working on development and not fighting each other." Another respondent says that national unity "can be seen through the events that are going on, such as when the markets are functioning, if the sports activities are peaceful, if there is peace and calm in the country, when there is no sectarian fighting, and when people can travel freely."

Some respondents attach greater value to the freedom of people to settle and live in any corner of South Sudan and intermarry. One of the respondents has the view that unity is strong when most citizens are not troubled by how unfairly they feel treated, when there is a feeling of oneness, and when there is peaceful co-existence among different communities. That is, national unity is achieved when there is a sense of fairness and justice, absence of violent conflict and presence of high level of cooperation and a sense of belonging among the citizens regardless of one's ethnicity and region. Finally, one respondent says, "we can tell unity is strong by looking at the way national issues are handled, when there is limited or no corruption, when equal opportunity is given irrespective of one's origin, political affiliation, gender, creed, ethnic, and religion."

Being aware of the importance of symbolism in social mobilization, respondents are asked to name the things that they believe symbolize national unity in South Sudan. The national anthem, coat of arms, constitution, and national flag came right up. Second, respondents also believe that a professional and representative national army and public law enforcement agencies symbolize unity. Others point to the fact that sports activities such as football, arts and music are also symbols of people's destiny. Sociocultural activities such as intermarriages promote integration and form bridges.

The role of the economy towards unity and social security is fundamental. Specifically, respondents believe that national currency, national market centers, and joint businesses symbolize national unity. Other respondents cite the importance of political institutions such as political parties, national parliament, and political institutions to national unity. Respondents emphasize the importance of functioning political parties based on political ideologies and the existence of national educational institutions as critically important in cultivating national cohesiveness. One respondent believes that national unity is symbolized by "the ability of individuals to access political positions regardless of origin, such as somebody with origins from Jonglei becoming a governor in Imatong", for example. Another respondent thinks that naming streets after people from various backgrounds across the nation could symbolize national unity. In all this, respondents believe that political leadership that demonstrates responsibility and cares for the welfare of all the citizens regardless of their diversities and places of origin would go a long way in realizing a united people.

Recognizing the fragility of national unity as a consequence of war and lapses in state authority, respondents are asked what they thought could restore and sustain people's harmony. For majority of the respondents, a strong sense of belonging, unrelenting system of justice, and inclusivity are core elements of national cohesion; and a strict observance of these principles ultimately sustains political and social harmony. The ability of citizens to associate freely with any political party matters in essential in cultivating a politically tolerant and cohesive society. An overwhelming number of respondents believe that a strong and good leadership can foster and nurture this kind of society. There is consciousness of national unity being a function of a combination of factors: quality education that prepares future leaders, rule of law and fair application of justice, economic stability, inclusivity and good governance. Having robust and enforceable policies that put citizens at the center of decision-making is equally a recipe for sustainable unity and stability. Restoring stability and furthering unity in the country demand embarking upon a sound agenda for national healing, peace and reconciliation. Finally, South Sudan is becoming increasingly unequal. Political elite, their families, and patronages have an unfettered access to public resources. This creates resentment, especially within quarters that feel economic marginalization. Similarly, an unfair power sharing presents potential for discord. One respondent puts it more succinctly: "the reason people fight even at the family level is when there are some people who feel really special and others that are treated as less special". Another respondent simply asks a question: "Why are some people better off than others?" Essentially, inequality breeds trouble. Our respondents, therefore, point to the importance of equitable distribution of resources and political power to unity engenderment and maintenance.

Given that unity is a construct, it can also falter and so the last question the respondents answer relates to what they think could hamper national unity. Interestingly, the respondents say that there are corrupt agents running the system and changing institutional restraints to fit the interest

of a select few pose gravest threats to national cohesion in South Sudan. They point to the fact that self-interest, greed, sectarianism, lack of transparency and accountability, and politicization of civil service all undermine national unity.

Also widely recognized is the abuse of power, misuse of the constitution, poor decision-making, poor management of resources, and lack of a coherent vision as adversely influencing national unity. Weak leadership and institutions, lack of peace building and national reconciliation initiatives, politicization of ethnic tensions by politicians all plague South Sudan and present deleterious consequences for national unity. Mistrust among political leaders, as well as the citizens, uneven development, and monopoly of power and domination of national affairs by some regional, ethnic, political groups—all pose a threat to people’s unity. This is because disproportionate representation of a few regional, ethnic, and political groups in the national affairs excludes others and births disharmony and plants seeds for conflict and a possibility of future disintegration. Ongoing hate speeches and politicians trading blames in response to the current crisis aggravate rifts.

### **3 Recommendations**

1. In order to restore national unity and cohesion in South Sudan, there is need for a speedy end to the on-going conflict. The killing of civilians and continued displacement of civil populations should be abated and those under the UN protection must be given enough assurances to find it safe to return home and rebuild their lives.
2. As a step towards ending the conflict, there is need for the political leadership to enter dialogue, renew commitment to permanent ceasefire and tone down the divisive rhetoric and propaganda that has characterized the conflict since its resumption in July 2016.
3. As a confidence building measure, should proceed with the process of national dialogue that is multi-staged, broad-based, transparent and credible so as to reconstitute political consensus, and renew social contract as a measure to prevent disintegration of the nation.
4. A massive political and institutional reform is needed to restore the confidence of the South Sudanese in the state institutions. This process should start with the transformation of the military and law enforcement agencies, making them inclusive, apolitical, and professional. Institutions of justice, such as judiciary, need recalibration and so are the institutions of social welfare.
5. Leadership remains a critical factor in attaining national unity, so there is need for the national leadership in the executive, legislature and in the political parties to take center stage in reversing the free fall of the South Sudanese society through their actions.
6. When people are starving, when they are feeling financially insecure, and when there is a sense of bleakness, it is unlikely for them to achieve cohesion. The economic condition must be improved and very quickly and this starts with ending the war. Otherwise, the growing rate of destitution and economic crimes adds a great deal of uncertainty to the future of the world’s newest state.

### **4 Conclusion**

In summarizing the argument presented above, we reiterate that national unity, in the South Sudanese perspective, is standing on three pillars. These are 1) justice (fairness, accountability, fundamental freedoms, recognition, dignity, and equality); 2) identity (vision, citizenship, culture,

institutions, and diversity); and finally 3) shared destiny (shared resources, power, identity, national pride, history, space, and culture).

Justice is a much deeper issue for the South Sudanese and it embodies recognition of individual and communal dignity, involves freedom to speak, freedom to socialize, freedom to move without fear, and freedom to live in a place of one's choice within South Sudan. It is the idea that all people are endowed with equal dignity and rights and deserve to be treated equal or fairly in all aspects of social and political life. Without justice, it would seem impossible to hold a society together. At the root of most conflicts in South Sudan is the idea of individual and communal dignity being threatened. A threat to communal dignity is an automatic existential threat, creating an environment in which violence thrives. For national unity to flourish, the administration of justice and its dispensation, and a sense that all state institutions are an embodiment of people's collective aspiration, ought to be embraced. In short, issues of justice and fundamental freedoms as the basis for building and sustaining national unity deserve to be prioritized.

Equally intrinsic is the idea of identity. Identity is essentially the worth, reputation, heritage and to a larger degree, the reason of being. One's identity can be threatened when one is excluded from a social or political organization, public decisions, or benefits for the commons. One's identity gets threatened when one feels prosecuted for belonging, believing, or descending from a particular background. The state, by definition, comes about as a result of recognition, accommodation, and acceptance of diverse identities. For society to experience peaceful coexistence, it makes sense for all to feel recognized, accepted, served, and celebrated. In the absence of this, conflicts seem inevitable.

Lastly, the idea of sharing is partly a key element of social contract, which seems to be a South Sudanese or African experience. South Sudanese grow up being told to share with family members, with members of their community, and even with their neighbors from other communities. In fact, the whole object of the South Sudanese society is built around sharing resources, space, feelings and emotions, and heritage and cultural values. As a social value, sharing is the glue that holds the society together and without it the society cracks, fades, and dies. The respondents in no uncertain terms have expressed the need for political leaders to distribute power, resources, and space. Lack of this, we find, constitutes one of the reasons the South Sudanese nation is greatly divided and in turmoil, with reinstating just and fair distribution of public resources and offices, and restoration of justice systems most likely to reconstitute unity in the country.

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