



# THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

P. O. Box 34, Juba, South Sudan • Tel: +211 (0)956 305 780  
Email: [thesudd.institute@gmail.com](mailto:thesudd.institute@gmail.com) • [www.suddinstitute.org](http://www.suddinstitute.org)

## Weekly Review

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### **The Sudd Institute's 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: The Challenges of Research Objectivity in South Sudan's Divisive Politics**

*The Sudd Institute's Team*

When the Sudd Institute was established in 2012, the people of South Sudan had just received the declaration of their new state with a mix of reactions. Independence was the culmination of the political evolution that had been long in the making and anticipated as the possible panacea for half of a century of instability. There were euphoria and expectations that at long last there was going to be peace, along with security and prosperity. But at the same time, the country was beset by serious existential challenges. The legacy of two decades of a very destructive liberation war sat weightily on the shoulders and conscience of the new state. It meant that insecurity left behind by this war would continue to wreak havoc throughout the country. It also meant that the sense of national unity was less than desired among the citizens. The notions of social cohesion and collective national belonging that transcended ethnic lines were seriously challenged by numerous legacies of the past wars. In a sense, South Sudanese were citizens of their ethnic communities more than they were citizens of a nation-state, a situation that is completely understandable given the tortured history of conflict and divisive management of the Sudan by various regimes.

Many observers recognized the dangers of such a setup and the co-founders of the Sudd Institute saw, as many others did, that in order to achieve peace, stability, national unity and prosperity, a dual project of nation-building and state-formation was most key. But this was a daunting project, one that required political will at the top, financial investment, enshrined equality of all citizens in the Constitution open political space and the provision of basic services. These were the things that reminded the citizens of their stakes in South Sudan's body politics. However, commitment to this project was not so evident among the leaders at the time and there was a need for research centers, civil society and activist-minded citizens to start urging these leaders to give priority to a project of making the South Sudanese citizens understand a sense of their collective belonging, now that the South Sudanese country had been born.

However, everything else was also a priority, from state institutions that had to be built from the scratch to grinding poverty, humanitarian crises and a lackluster rule of law environment. Most citizens were food insecure. There was no healthcare system to speak

of and infant and maternal mortality were among the highest in the world. The literacy rate was 20% for general population and a pathetic 2% for women. Above all, there was such dearth in terms of mobilizing and deploying skilled human resources capable of confronting these challenges. The result was the influx of donor aid and an army of humanitarian workers, most of whom came without a plan and no clear goals, other than to "help." But by far the most important concern for the citizens of the young state was security, something no foreign aid and expertise had the capacity to provide. Of all the priorities, it was the most difficult to achieve, given the burden of war mentioned above. The many layers of conflict that had characterized the liberation era had wrecked relations between various ethnic communities. Too many citizens were left armed and continued to arm themselves as the state quickly proved unable to protect them. It was easier to buy a gun than to find a hospital bed or a trained health worker for a woman in labor.

Even worse, the state security units: the SPLA, the National Police Service and all the various organized security forces were all seriously challenged, burdened by the mass absorption of all the militias that had proliferated since 1991. These forces were quite undisciplined and lacked centralized command and control structures, meaning that some of them were the source of insecurity, rather than being the providers of security. Prospects for stability were becoming increasingly remote as South Sudan edged toward independence, and even more distant following the July 2011 independence. These were indisputable facts, but the programs designed to confront them were not more than mere pledges. The country's security sector reform, DDR, military integration, downsizing, and professionalization were all a disaster. And yet, public officials and military generals spoke as if nothing seemed to daunt a young vibrant country, run by revolutionaries who had devoted so much of their own lives to this project. In putting so much hope in the liberators, South Sudan had surely set itself up for failure and massive disappointment among the populace.

Institutional capacity of the state to withstand these challenges was not only lacking but the little that existed was being eroded by corruption, nepotism, and disregard for the rule of law. Citizens were losing trust in the state, in the political leadership that ran the country and in the value of their citizenship in the nation. The new country also lacked a homegrown philosophy of development and instead, relied on prescriptions from donor countries, foreign consultants and on public officials who only reacted to emerging challenges rather than planning ahead. There was a strong attitude among many public officials that they could do all this without research and analysis, without a technical know-how. South Sudanese describe this attitude, as "I know" syndrome, that many of these public officials simply assumed they knew how to run a state, when in fact, many of them didn't but were unwilling to seek field-based research, analysis, technical assistance and advice from the country's own technically resourced citizens.

The main strategic goal of the Sudd Institute, therefore, was to contribute toward the development of a culture of research. At the outset, the Institute confronted one particular challenge, the question of its independence and neutrality. Its staff has since worked very hard to maintain the posture of independence, focusing on the production of credible field-based research and the promotion of such research to become the basis for

public policy decisions. As South Sudan came into existence as an independent state in 2011 and needing much effort to be invested in its stability, the Institute's strategic goal was to contribute directly toward properly understanding the country from every angle and to encourage public institutions, donor agencies, civil society and the international community to seek field-based analysis before they design policies. We quickly noticed that every one of these entities, from government institutions to opposition political parties, civil society, the international community and regional organizations, had a perspective on how to achieve stability, development, governance, democracy and national cohesion in South Sudan. But naturally, they disagreed on the approach to this endeavor. Some focused on building state institutions, some on security, others on nation-building efforts, and others on service provision and humanitarian responses, but all without coordination.

It was in this environment that it became evident that an independent research center would be an extremely important entity, a body to watch and critique the efforts being made in the development of the young country. So the founders of the Sudd Institute reasoned that the country needed to develop a culture of research as a basis for making major policy decisions. As things stood in 2011 and 2012, public policy was being made in a vacuum and at the personal discretion of public officials. Major public policy decisions that affected people's lives were being made without credible data collection, analysis, debate and no established measurable benchmarks against which to evaluate progress. In fact, such decisions as budget allocation, security sector reform, development plans, natural resource use, decentralization, local government procedures, other administrative decisions, educational and health services were not only made without basic qualitative research or surveys to find basic facts but also operated as if these programs do not have linkages with each other. The institutions in charge were also quite hostile to the idea of research, evaluation, critique and debate. It was as if to suggest that the minister or director concerned just knew what to do and didn't have to conduct or contract research.

The reality was that there was no way for them to know this on their own. But more importantly, they were suspicious that such research would focus on their own individual actions. For example, in an environment where corruption and other forms of fiscal misconduct exist, many officials equated research, evaluation, record keeping and policy debate with being audited, that it might reveal some of their misdeeds. Everything was done to obstruct any efforts to look through government books for the simple purpose of knowing how decisions were made. Case in point was an endeavor that the office of the president commissioned in 2011 to evaluate the performance of the then Government of Southern Sudan. Many department heads simply objected to much of this work and further instructions had to be obtained from above in order for the work to be allowed to proceed

The Sudd Institute saw both a challenge and an opportunity in this diversity of opinion, that there was still a culture of an open and democratic society that could be nurtured to produce two important pillars upon which the young state could stand. First, we saw that there was a need for the development of a culture that emphasized research as a basis for major public policy decisions. Second, South Sudan needed to develop a culture of

dialogue, public debate and open political space as an avenue to reconciliation, peace building and the supremacy of the rule of law. The credibility of the Institute's products depended on its ability to act as a neutral broker of this debate and on its capacity to produce unbiased knowledge. Our initial focus was on peace and security, stability, democracy and governance, the constitution and the rule of law, service provision and development. As these were extremely complex issues and most South Sudanese agreed on their importance but differed on how to approach them, it was the work of a research center such as the Sudd Institute to try to untangle these complexities in ways that helped public officials make relevant decisions and the citizens to engage with the government. Our research findings were presented in ways that encouraged debate on matters of public policy, not in ways that condemned any party. We saw that there was no use in vilifying the government, even when it made mistakes, as throwing a barrage of criticism constitutes antagonism and leaves no room for engagement. Examples from other developing countries show that governments simply shut the doors on the face of dialogue when they feel cornered and independent researchers lose the chance to influence their decisions. Influencing government decision-making process and pushing for policies that positively impact peoples' lives is a function of time; governments need to be assured that criticism is not for the sake of criticism but a plea for reforms, something they should see as beneficial to them and should embrace.

Maintaining independence and neutrality of a think tank in South Sudan has become even more important since 2013 when the country plunged into a civil war, dividing the people of South Sudan along political, ethnic and regional fault lines, among others. The crisis of this war has challenged everyone's quest for objectivity and think tanks of the Sudd Institute's caliber have come to be expected by many citizens and entities to take sides in these divides. At times, some circles within the government seem to suspect the Sudd Institute of being an arm of sinister foreign parties that is supporting the opposition. Equally, some opposition figures often accuse the Institute of being in the pay of the government and that it is deployed by government agencies to push the government agenda. There are elements within the civil society organizations that hold the view that the Sudd Institute should be an advocacy organization that campaigns for the removal of some of the government officials. Of course, it is important to note that these views are unofficially expressed. However, one prominent politician on the opposition side, even as he cites no evidence of such, recently went public to accuse the Institute of being part of a program of domination by Jieng, South Sudan's biggest ethnic group.

Despite these accusations, the Sudd Institute has been steadfast in its dealings with all the political forces in the country, with a view to understanding each party's standpoint vis-à-vis the challenges that have faced the development of South Sudan since 2005, and more especially since 2011. In dealing with government, our emphasis has been two-pronged. One is to assist in the development of institutional research units, such that each major department acquires techniques of data generation, analysis and use in the making of policy decisions. Second is to work closely with the legislature and political parties such that its oversight role is improved and adherent to the constitution strengthened. The Sudd Institute Research and Training Departments have delivered packages of technical training to staff in these units for the last 5 years. It is these efforts to influence the decision-making process in public institutions that some people have seen as working

for these institutions. But the fact is that we are constantly pointing out to the leaders of these institutions, be it in the judiciary, legislature, cabinet, the army or national security, any major mistakes that our research has demonstrated. Sometimes the Institute staff members are called into the offices of some of these institutions to be offered a variety of reactions and perspectives on their research. Sometimes they are accused of ill intentions in the findings of their research. Other times they are praised and asked for more elaboration and advice on the way forward. When this happens, whether condemnation or praise, we find gratification in it, that our goal of promoting dialogue as part of public policy-making is being achieved.

Just to illustrate, examples of some of the most contentious issues between us and the government include questions around the actions of national security agents, how the government deals with humanitarian crises, human rights violations, some of the bills that the law-making body passes, how the war is being conducted, issues of corruption, the economy and mistakes in dealing with the international community. When we point out these issues, some public officials sometimes see it as insulting the government, but the debate that ensues is what gives us hope that South Sudan will eventually develop a culture of tolerance and dialogue, something that will promote democracy, good governance, and individual enterprise. We believe that a society where major issues of concern are discussed openly without anyone losing her freedom or her life for speaking her mind is indeed a society that can innovate and thrive. It is our aspiration that South Sudan becomes such a society. That is a long-term project and the Sudd Institute is motivated to contribute to such a development.

In dealing with the opposition, whether political parties or armed groups, our intention is not to express our individual differences with them but to try to present their perspective on the crises facing the country and their approaches to peace and security, stability and development, war and humanitarian consequences. Some of the first issues they express include the question of our neutrality; with many of them doubting us simply because the Institute is based in Juba and that the government tolerates our criticism because the Institute must be part of its charm offensive. Our response is that we see ourselves as part of the solution to the crises facing the country, not as a party to the conflict. In engaging with the opposition, the government has also wondered about the extent to which the Institute might be promoting dissent and giving voice and visibility to entities deemed anti-state. Our response to this has often been that the solution to the security, political, social, economic and humanitarian crises confronting South Sudan can only be attained if all parties present their grievances and demands, especially since all are convinced that no matter how long or bitter the conflict will be, it will eventually be resolved through political settlements. Surely, a settlement cannot be attained without the articulation of the views of each side and without the public being involved in the debate on these perspectives. It is only when political forces talk to one another and understand each other's position that the gaps can surely be narrowed and the public convinced to buy into the settlements. The Sudd Institute sees itself as an honest facilitator of these discussions, mainly through publications, public lectures and through the extension of the Institute's opinions directly to government officials and to the opposition forces.

With regards to the relationship with civil society, the Sudd Institute certainly sees itself as a strong member of this category of social forces, but slightly different from the kind of activism that demands a change of government or provides a humanitarian service to the citizens where the government has failed. The main objective of the Sudd Institute here is to offer tools that civil society can use in its activism. For example, if a civil society organization demands that the government embarks on reconciliation, the Sudd Institute can provide an analysis of how it can be done, conducts research on what types of reconciliation mechanisms would be most fitting for South Sudan, which entities are more capable of leading them, where to do it and which levels of community would be the best starting points. This advice would be given after a field research, analysis and debate, to ensure that a civil society organization pushes, without antagonizing decision-makers, for reconciliation on the basis of knowledge, not on the basis of political ideology, ethnic leanings or any other kind of bias the individuals in the said organization might have.

There is a fundamental and existential problem that think tanks and research institutions in the global South all face, the question of funding and the obligations that come with such support. Some of these centers are government-funded and thus are independent within the limits that the government allows them. These are often linked to decision-making processes in place to directly advise the government. They seldom criticize the government. Others are privately funded within the country and there are varying degrees of independence that such institutions can maintain, depending on both their desperation for funds as well as the aspiration of the donors. Some of these private donors may be independent in appearance but are essentially interested in specific policies that they want the government to pursue and are using the think tanks they fund to push those policies. Most research centers, however, are funded by grants and donations from the global North and their independence or lack thereof depends on the think tanks' ability to resist the aspirations of their donors, negotiate a compromise or entirely object to such heavily pegged funding.

The Sudd Institute has been lucky to receive donor funding from the US, Europe and from the United Nations, funding that was negotiated to accommodate both parties' sense of what's important for South Sudan. There have been cases where the donor has insisted that the Sudd Institute focuses on issues that lie outside its strategic goals. Other donors have pegged their offers of funding to a program that the Sudd Institute has deemed unrelated to the priorities of the country. In all such instances, the Sudd Institute has simply declined to do business under such conditional approach, end of story.

In conclusion, as South Sudan is so deeply divided at the moment, our goal is to contribute to repairing these divisions, as the country would not be able to move forward without mending the gaping wounds that have been created by the conflict. We are convinced that staying above the fray is a measure of commitment to objectivity and neutrality, for such stance is the only way to remain influential. Research centers facilitate dialogue, encourage research and analysis, but do not take sides or call for the overthrow of governments. Engaging with government officials is the only way to understand why they make certain decisions and how one might indirectly prevent them from making bad decisions. Alienating the government and calling for its removal is not an effective

approach to public policy. Likewise, we have a responsibility to reach out, consult and debate the opposition forces, civil society and all other citizen activists, first to understand their views on pressing matter confronting the country and secondly, to help all forces build bridges between them and to see that they have common destiny, that of giving peace a chance or else. Our recent efforts in encouraging the Government and all the parties to enter dialogue speak to our role as bride makers amongst the parties to the conflict.

What the Sudd Institute needs is to build a strong communication team that can articulate these views in ways that are accessible to all citizens. The Institute is not in the pay of the government, not an arm of sinister foreign agencies, and not a voice for the opposition. It is an independent public institution attempting to give space to the truth. Opinions held by individual staff members and expressed in different venues such as social media or in the news outlets are strictly their own and not those of the Institute unless stated otherwise. It is such sentiments that might sometimes give the impression that the Sudd Institute supports this or the other force. Nevertheless, we advise our readers and followers to consume such ideas as may be expressed by individuals in their right contexts and not assume that the said individual is speaking for a particular entity. As well, our 'researchers' are not expected to have the same knowledge on issues as an average consumer otherwise, they would have no added value, so they are expected to interact with a wide range of actors to stay informed and to provide a nuanced analysis of political developments. They should not be seen as associates or members of parties with which they interact as they attempt to extract and sieve information.

As the Sudd Institute marks its 5th anniversary this month, its leadership wants to let the public know that the journey has been both challenging and exciting. Nevertheless, we are grateful to our partners and critics alike. Both your commendations and criticisms have made us a better people's policy think tank. We appreciate your thoughts, as we continue our journey towards positively transforming South Sudanese lives through practical research.

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### **About Sudd Institute**

The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.