



# THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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## The Dialogue Brief

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### National Dialogue: A Critical Perspective

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**I**s the National Dialogue in South Sudan turning out to be a nice surprise to those who wanted it but feared that it would not succeed, or a disappointment to those who opposed it or predicted its failure?

When President Salva Kiir Mayardit announced the National Dialogue Initiative on December 14, 2016, and then launched it officially on May 22, 2017, there were a variety of responses, whether openly or privately voiced. Some people thought it was a noble and indeed timely initiative, and others pessimistically feared that it would not amount to much. The cynics thought it was another delay tactics or even a distraction from serious efforts to implement the 2015 IGAD-negotiated agreement to resolve the conflict in South Sudan; they also predicted that it was doomed to fail. Probably only a minority felt positively that it was an opportunity to be taken seriously to end the proliferating violence that is devastating the country.

Barely two months since it was officially launched, the National Dialogue initiative appears to be turning out quite nicely. In response to critical reactions, the President repeatedly revised the composition of the National Dialogue Steering Committee to ensure inclusivity, credibility and transparency. The first week of the plenary debates by the Steering Committee demonstrated that the members were taking their responsibility very seriously. The debates were open, free, heated, frank, critical and transparent. There was no sign of harassment or intimidation from any security operatives or government agents.

The composition of the Sub-Committees that will conduct regional and grass roots consultations was by choice. The Steering Committee agreed on fifteen Sub-Committees based on the Ten Old States for logistical reasons, to which were added five additional Sub-Committees on Abyei, Boma, the National Capital, Security, and International Outreach to Refugees and the Diaspora. The Chairpersons of the Sub-Committees were agreed upon and the rest of the membership was determined by personal choice, provided that the number of each Sub-Committee did not exceed five, including the chairperson.

Following the selection of the Sub-Committees, seminars were organized in which experts were invited to offer expertise on how to conduct consultations and share the lessons learned from other National Dialogues. These seminars also proved very useful in preparing the Sub-Committees for their field mission and reinforcing the fundamental principles to be observed to ensure success of the process. The Sub-Committees are now set to embark on their regional and grass roots consultations, which are expected to last about two months.

Meanwhile, the Leadership of the Steering Committee has initiated consultations with the leaders of the opposition abroad, with the objective of making the process more inclusive, and to engage as many parties to the conflict as possible to promote the comprehensiveness of the peace process.

In June, 2017, a delegation of the National Dialogue Leadership visited South Africa in an attempt to meet with Dr. Riek Machar and although he declined the request, the delegation held constructive discussions with the Deputy President of South Africa, H.E. Cyril Ramaphosa. The Deputy President reaffirmed the strong support of his country to the National Dialogue and offered to share the experience of South Africa that is pertinent to the challenges facing South Sudan. He also undertook to continue to exert efforts to persuade Riek Machar to join the National Dialogue and to meet with the delegation of its leadership. The same delegation later visited Nairobi and had constructive discussions with representatives of the Former Detainees on issues ranging from what is ideally desirable from their perspective, to what is negotiable, and what is doable by mutual agreement.

Another delegation of the National Dialogue visited Khartoum and Addis Ababa to consult with Dr. Lam Akol and other opposition leaders. Yet another delegation is to visit Addis Ababa to consult with the leaders of the African Union, the Inter-Governmental Authority for Development (IGAD), and the Government of Ethiopia. More delegations will reach out to those in refugee camps and the diaspora in different parts of the world.

Meanwhile, the sub-committees of the National Dialogue are set to go to the field beginning with several areas for a pilot project to conduct consultations at the regional and grassroots level and one international center. The recommendations of these field missions, and from other outreach consultations, will eventually provide the basis for preparing the agenda on issues for the consideration of the National Dialogue Conference that will make the final recommendations of the National Dialogue.

The objective is to engage as many South Sudanese as possible, inside the country and abroad, in a determined effort to end the violence that is devastating the country and turning its social fabric apart. The longer-term objective is not only to end the war, but also to promote a culture of peaceful engagement through dialogue to address the structural sources of conflict at all levels and to institutionalize the process of restoring sustainable peace, security, stability, and development in a beleaguered country.

If the National Dialogue process continues in the way it has so far been conducted, observing the principles of inclusivity, credibility, and transparency which have been widely

advocated as crucial to the success of any National Dialogue, then the prospects of success are quite promising. If the momentum and integrity which the process has so far demonstrated are maintained through the regional and grassroots consultations, and continue on to the National Conference that will formulate the final recommendations, then the only remaining challenge will be one of implementation.

It is not as yet clear what mechanism will be charged with the responsibility of implementation. Wherever the responsibility will ultimately lie, if the process maintains its integrity up to that point, then the weight of the moral pressure, both domestically and internationally, to ensure a credible, recognized, and respected implementation of the recommendations will be difficult to resist. Failure to live up to this challenge is bound to have serious consequences for the authority responsible for implementation. It is one to be wisely avoided.

If what I have outlined in this brief note is valid, then those who had predicted or favored the failure of the process have reason to be disappointed, while those who had anticipated or hoped for its success can be at least guardedly optimistic. For those of us who are engaged in this process, strategic optimism, especially if well grounded, is part of our motivation. I trust that our optimism is reasonably well grounded.

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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.

### **Author's Biography**

*Francis M. Deng* has recently been assigned the position of South Sudan's Roving Ambassador after having been the country's first Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Prior to that, he served for five years as the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide at the level of Under-Secretary-General. From 1992 to 2004, he served as Representative of the Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons. His first position in the United Nations was that of Human Rights Officer in the Secretariat from 1967 to 1972 when he was appointed Sudan's Ambassador to the Nordic Countries. He was also Sudan's Ambassador to Canada and the United States of America and was also Minister of State for Foreign Affairs for five years. After leaving his Government's service, he held a series of positions in leading think tanks and universities in the United States. Dr. Deng graduated with an LLB (honors) from the University of Khartoum to which he was appointed member of the Law Faculty and then sent abroad for post-graduate studies. He holds an LLM and a JSD from Yale University Law School. Dr. Deng has authored and edited over thirty books in a wide variety of fields and has written two novels on the crisis of national identity in the Sudan.