

NGO coordination in south Sudan

by Adele Sowinska and Wendy Fenton

The peace agreement and the establishment of a government in south Sudan pose new challenges to established means of NGO coordination.

The NGO Forum was started in 1996 to bring together international NGOs (INGOs) associated with Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) – the umbrella operation for UN agencies and NGOs working in southern Sudan established in 1989. The Forum was created to discuss issues around programming, delivery of humanitarian aid and access, and subsequently evolved to include non-OLS members and Sudanese Indigenous NGOs (SINGOs). From the outset the Forum developed terms of reference, met monthly and agreed that representation would be through an elected Steering Committee (SC) of seven to eight NGOs. Representation on the SC was initially divided between European/US and larger/smaller NGOs but it soon became clear some of the smaller NGOs did not have sufficient staff to allocate to SC activities. High-level liaison with donors and the UN were the responsibility of the SC which consulted with the larger forum on matters of common interest and advocacy.

Working under a tripartite agreement between the UN, Government of Sudan (GoS) and the SPLM meant that NGOs, which came under the umbrella of the UN, were unequal partners. With the establishment of the Forum and the SC, NGOs could use their collective voice to greater advantage. Unfortunately, the OLS/non-OLS distinction – which the UN was obliged to maintain rigorously until the peace talks were well underway – created artificial divisions

and rivalries which undermined coordination between NGOs. Lack of international political recognition of the SPLM's de facto government complicated attracting funding. Lacking a viable tax base, and in the absence of effective governance and regulation, the local authorities resorted to taxing NGOs directly and indirectly – behaviour which was tolerated, and even encouraged, by some donors.

The NGO Forum provided an entry point for NGOs to engage with and influence the process and outcomes of the Joint Assessment Mission (JAM). The Forum appointed NGOs to serve as JAM cluster focal points, enabling the JAM teams to get NGO perspectives without having to consult individually all of the members. Forum engagement through the SC and focal points has helped to establish NGO credibility with new and important actors such as the World Bank and UNDP.

Although it will never be possible for the Forum to represent adequately the views of all 80+ NGOs working in south Sudan, attempts are always made to consult as widely as possible and to integrate differing viewpoints. Some NGOs are particularly good at keeping abreast of the complex political context of Sudan while others are more focused on programme implementation. The broad range of mandates, structures and capacities of INGOs and NGOs – and the fact that some have overt political allegiances – makes it dif-

icult to reach consensus and could make it difficult to agree on self-regulation mechanisms. Even larger NGOs are already overstretched and senior staff often find it hard to contribute to the Forum.

Individual SINGOs and small INGOs do not always have the capacity to participate actively in the Forum, particularly on the SC. There is a danger – real or perceived – that their perspectives are not adequately represented or that they feel excluded altogether. Some Sudanese NGOs who are members of SINGO networks, such as New Sudan Indigenous NGOs (NESI)¹ and the Federation of Sudanese Civil Society Organizations (FOSCO), have tried to address this issue by allowing the networks – to represent them.

New realities

To date, all NGO Forum meetings have been held in Nairobi. In future, the NGO Forum hopes to hold most meetings in south Sudan. Many NGOs have already established bases or liaison offices in Rumbek, the former capital of south Sudan, or are focusing on improving infrastructure and management presence at bases and offices in other parts of Sudan.

Prior to the peace process it was possible for NGOs to bypass the SPLM and the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (SRRC), its humanitarian wing. The policies of many donors and the UN discouraged or even prohibited direct engagement with the SPLM. Now that the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) has been formed, the establishment of a clear and workable NGO regulatory framework is essential to provide an

environment conducive to recovery and development. Recognising this, the SRRC/SPLM and NGOs have made huge efforts to work together to develop an inclusive and open process for the design of this framework. At meetings in Rumbek the SRRC/SPLM ensured that SINGOs and INGOs were represented equally. Discussions were frank and all participants were able to express their diverse views in an open and unthreatening environment. The meeting benefited from the presence of Dr Riek Machar, 2nd Vice-Chairman of the SPLM, and Dr Bellario Ahoy Ngong, the Director of the SRRC. The SPLM confirmed their intention to provide an enabling environment for both NGOs and the private sector. They also indicated that, while the role of NGOs may not change dramatically, NGOs will need to recognise the central role of GoSS in recovery and development policies and planning and to formally register with a newly formed NGO Board comprised of NGOs, GoSS and SRRC representatives.

Coordination around IDP and refugee return and reintegration should benefit from establishment of a clear NGO regulatory framework. In 2001 Francis Deng (the then Special Representative of the Secretary General) chaired a conference in Rumbek to address IDP issues and assist the SRRC to plan for their eventual return. While important issues like protection were discussed at the meeting, and the IDP Framework drafted and later endorsed by both the SPLM and GoS, there has been no structured follow up. NGOs can and should play a role in holding the GoS, GoSS and UN to account for ensuring that the IDP Framework and the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are upheld, that forced returns do not take place and that returnees and potential returnees are not manipulated by political actors.

For more than a year the GoSS/UN-led Sustainable Returns Team (SRT) has been responsible for planning for returns to all areas of the South. However, the SRT's ability to carry out its responsibilities has been constrained. Meetings only take place in Rumbek and not in other areas of southern Sudan. They involve only a handful of NGOs who happen to be present in Rumbek, are not usually attended by decision makers and information presented is at times inaccurate. In addition, there is no

discussion on the resources available to implement some of the recommendations. The meetings, therefore, focus on information sharing, rather than decision making.

Challenges ahead

Although initial meetings and discussions around the future NGO regulatory framework have been positive, there remain many challenges to effective NGO coordination in south Sudan:

- There is ongoing lack of clarity regarding the relationship between the CPA and the proposed local governance framework.
- The timetable for establishing the political structures and wider legal framework within which the NGO regulatory framework will be situated remains unclear.
- There are tensions between centralists and decentralists in the SPLM regarding the regulatory roles of the SRRC and various ministries, commissions or departments: NGOs have received mixed messages as to which authorities they should interact with.
- There are difficulties recruiting international and national staff willing to be based in south Sudan: GoSS, the UN, donor missions and NGOs are all competing for the same limited pool of qualified and experienced Sudanese staff.
- It is unclear at what level of the emerging administrative structure NGOs will coordinate.
- SPLM bodies still require substantial support from the UN and NGOs in order to carry out coordination functions effectively.
- Many mid- and high-level SPLM/GoSS government personnel not only have duties associated with their membership in the SPLM Leadership Council and in CPA-related bodies but now have even less time to devote to coordination as they attend the plethora of post-peace agreement capacity-building events.
- There is an increasing tendency for GoSS and donors alike to view NGOs merely as contractors and implementors, ignoring their role as advocates and contributors to policy debates.

NGOs, local government authorities and communities who are used

to operating primarily in relief and emergency modes will find it difficult to adapt to a context which requires a range of relief, recovery and development responses within an agreed government framework. The continuing lack of emerging government capacity has led to unrealistic and unreasonable expectations regarding the role NGOs will play in service delivery. The SPLM will need to articulate a vision of peacebuilding which embodies principles of justice that can be integrated into the existing policies, structures and systems of the new government. Dealing with the latent conflicts expected to surface in the wake of the CPA and ensuring peace will require a coordinated response by the GoSS, NGOs, civil society groups and churches. NGOs should not be confined to a service provision role but be allowed to continue to provide valuable input into policy and strategy debates and, when necessary, to act as watchdogs and advocates.

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1. www.nesinetwork.org

Guiding Principles available in Dinka and Nuer

Dinka: www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/resources/GPsDinka_20051018.pdf

Nuer: www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/resources/GPsNuer_20051018.pdf

The Brookings-Bern Project on Internal Displacement has had the Guiding Principles translated into Dinka and Nuer, the languages of the two major tribes of southern Sudan most affected by internal displacement. The Dinka and Nuer translations will be widely disseminated among civil society groups in Sudan as well as to the Dinka and Nuer diasporas. They will also be made available to government offices, UN agencies and NGOs. For copies, visit our webpage or contact Molly Browning at mbrowning@brookings.edu.