



Search for Common Ground South Sudan

2017 – 2021 Country Strategy

Context of Intervention

Conflict and violence have plagued South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, since 2013. An alleged coup attempt to overthrow Salva Kiir, South Sudan's first president, prompted fighting along tribal lines. Despite the signature of a peace agreement in August 2015, the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), the country continues to struggle. As the ARCSS implementation faltered, violence between factions broke out again in July 2016, setting back the peace process once again and generating fear of ethnic cleansing, while leaving the international community's strategies for engagement uncertain.

The humanitarian impact of the violence is severe. Over 50,000 have been killed, more than 3 million have been displaced, and 5.8 million are now facing severe hunger and food insecurity as a result of the disrupted agricultural seasons. The population continues to suffer through severe physical hardships and widespread human rights abuses, in a context of increased criminality, widespread impunity and absence of rule of law. The economic crisis is acute. Hyperinflation and lack of access to livelihoods have resulted in high levels of poverty. At the same time, democratic space and freedom of expression remain restricted. Due to widespread intimidation, media outlets regularly engage in self-censorship on sensitive topics, leaving the public with limited access to independent and accurate reporting, as well as avenues to express their voices.

At the national level, the current context is particularly volatile. The absence of government control over most of the country's territory and the power vacuum created by the loss of credibility of the Sudan People's Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO) have led to the fractionalization of the country in multiple regional militia groups, competing over resources and power. At the same time, South Sudanese's sense of national identity remains weak, and tribalism is a reality in many communities.

At the local level, violence has left communities without platforms for constructive engagement and dialogue around peace and protection. National events have exacerbated local cycles of grievance and revenge, resulting in explosive community reactions. In a context of unresolved historical grievances and faulty reconciliation processes, and while small arms continue to circulate across the country, resource disputes have triggered intense violence between ethnic groups, reducing community resilience to political manipulation and related violence.

Despite these obstacles, there are local-level voices and efforts for peace that, if properly cultivated, stand a chance of building critical linkages to support protection and security of vulnerable communities. In order to build peace and stability in the country, it must first be nurtured "in the home." While political negotiations flounder, citizens across South Sudan can be engaged in

community-level processes reinforcing the underlying values of the ARCSS, fighting the current climate of ethnic divisionism and hate speech, and building a foundation for peace that posits tolerance and reconciliation in order to interrupt and counter the ongoing vicious cycles of violence.

Strategic Response

Building on its three years working in South Sudan and 20 years in sensitive contexts in East Africa, Search for Common Ground, one of the largest conflict transformation organizations in the world, has developed its vision for the country: *“Search envision a peaceful and secure South Sudan where communities amplify inclusiveness, tolerance, resilience and coexistence.”*

To achieve this vision, and based on a series of consultations with key stakeholders, an analysis of conflict issues in South Sudan and in the region, as well as a reflection on gaps and added-value, we have identified two key strategic objectives and series of related outcomes:

1) To create ongoing opportunities for key stakeholders and citizens to engage in diverse platforms for understanding, learning, and solving problems.

Outcome 1.1: Platforms for inclusive and constructive dialogue and engagement are increasingly available, including for displaced populations and host communities.

Outcome 1.2: Community dispute resolution mechanisms are supported, with a view to strengthen their quality, credibility and efficiency.

Outcome 1.3: A diversity of perspectives is reflected in the media in a constructive way, highlighting new and influential voices (youth, women, CSOs, religious leaders, government champions and local authorities).

Outcome 1.4: Stereotypes around tribal issues are debunked, differences and diversity are appreciated.

2) To mobilize diverse stakeholders to foster informed discussions and advance tolerance and peaceful coexistence at the community level.

Outcome 2.1: Communities, including displaced populations, have access to reliable information, reflecting diverse perspectives and promoting peaceful coexistence.

Outcome 2.2: Local stakeholders, including civil society, government institution and media, have increased capacity to become agents of positive change.

Outcome 2.3: Relationships between security forces and the civilian population are improved through local opportunities for collaboration.

Search identified four key themes to be addressed as priorities in the scope of these objectives:

1) Promoting Peaceful Community Coexistence and Tolerance

While the outlook for national-level peace in South Sudan is quite pessimistic, Search believes that a community-focused approach can contribute to the operationalization of the positive values and principles sought in the national-level peace process, such as peaceful coexistence and tolerance. With cultivation, promoting these values can build critical linkages to support the protection and security of vulnerable communities, fostering peace from the bottom-up. Search will thus focus its efforts at the community level, supporting local-level engagement around peacebuilding and conflict transformation in order to interrupt and counter the ongoing vicious cycles of violence and human rights abuses that find their origins in clan and sub-clan revenge cycles. Acknowledging the

hardships that many communities are facing across the country, Search will seek to identify entry points such as common social, economic or livelihood interests that all communities relied on to build on commonalities in order to break mistrust, divisions, and enhance social cohesion. We will both build local capacities and create opportunities for conflict transformation, using traditional mediation and dialogue-based activities, as well as entertaining and engaging outreach activities such as participatory theater, sport and cultural events, and peace initiatives to bring communities together across dividing lines. These initiatives will provide communities with an open space for expression, foster constructive dialogue among a diversity of community members, and support psychosocial healing in key communities. Given the number of refugees and internally displaced persons, Search will put an emphasis on targeting displaced populations, in South Sudan and neighboring countries.

2) Strengthening New and Influential Institutions and Voices for Peace

In a context of fragmentation and polarization, Search will aim to support the emergence and strengthen new and influential institutions and voices that can reach out to communities across dividing lines and promote peace. While Search will work with traditional leaders, such as elders and religious leaders, who are seen as open influencers, we will also aim to engage other influencers, which can be more hidden, for instance women and youth. Because they influence attitudes and behavior in informal social spaces like the home, women are incredibly important to reach in order to build healthy communities and encourage solutions for peace. Youth, while widely characterized as instigators of violence, are actually a diverse group with a wide array of opinions on peace. Our research and experience have shown their potential to engage in peacebuilding. Overall, they are most likely to identify as ‘South Sudanese’ – a unifying factor defined by communities. Search will empower them and amplify their voices to promote a positive narrative and national identity based on values such as tolerance, peaceful coexistence and collaboration. Search will also work in social spaces, such as churches and schools, which constitute popular spaces that provide opportunities for people to gather and have discussions across dividing lines.

3) Leveraging the Power of Media to Promote Tolerance, Diversity, and a Positive National Identity

Given the geography and security context of South Sudan, where most of the territory remains hard to reach, and building on its decade of experience strengthening media sectors across Sub-Saharan Africa, Search will leverage the power of media, and more specifically radio, to promote peace, diversity, and a positive national identity at the national level. Search will build the capacities of media professionals to help them navigate the sensitive context, as well as to strengthen their role as agent of positive change, delivering balanced information to the population, preventing rumor and manipulation and countering stereotypes. Through radio programming, both magazine and drama, Search will highlight voices for peace and strengthen understanding of key peacebuilding concepts. These programs will provide hope and offer alternatives, countering violent speech and showing opportunities for and the value of localized peace, inspiring communities and encouraging replication. By their interactive formats, the programs will also provide the population with a safe space for dialogue, connecting a diversity of citizens among themselves and with their leaders.

4) Improving Civilians and Security Actors Relationships

Since independence, South Sudan has faced numerous challenges related to security sector reform, which has been a key priority to stabilize the country. Recognizing these challenges, but also the importance of improving civilian-military relations to advance peacebuilding, Search will seek to engage with the South Sudanese army to promote protection of civilians. Working with the South Sudan People's Armed Forces (SPLA) Chaplains group, Search will seek to shift behavior towards increased protection of civilians and promote cross-ethnic tolerance within the army. Search will also seek to connect chaplains to civilian community and traditional and religious leaders as an entry point for citizens, including victims of soldiers' abuses, to build bridges with security forces in South Sudan. Finally, leveraging the popularity of its radio programs, and especially our drama *Sergeant Esther*, which tells the story of a police woman who resolves conflicts with dialogue and nonviolence, speaking up against the misuse of power and authority, Search will seek to shift norms and behaviors within the security forces, towards reduced corruption and human rights abuses.

Geographic Focus

Leveraging its presence and relationships, Search will seek to strengthen its work in areas where it has been operating over the past three years, while adapting to the evolving conflict dynamics. Target areas will include: *Jonglei*, *Western Bahr el-Ghazal*, *Eastern Equatoria*, *Central Equatoria*, and *Western Equatoria*. Through our partnerships with radio stations across the country, we will also aim to have a national reach by promoting messages of non-violence, tolerance, and cohesion at the national level to maximize our impact.

Organizational Background and Added-Value

Founded in 1982, Search is an international conflict transformation organization dedicated to transforming the way the world deals with conflict, away from adversarial approaches, toward cooperative solutions. Search's core principles include reaching out to all parties and encouraging them to cooperate with those they disagree and to focus on positive opportunities and commonalities.

In South Sudan, Search aims to promote social cohesion, resilience and the peaceful resolution of conflicts among individuals and communities in South Sudan. We seek to support diverse and constructive dialogue across all levels of society, with a particular emphasis on youth. We utilize strategic communication to further peacebuilding through the combination of media and outreach activities in the seven South Sudanese states that continue to be affected by deadly violence and acute social divisions.

Our toolbox in South Sudan includes: training material and experienced trainers in conflict transformation and conflict sensitive journalism; participatory theater experts and trained troupes; drama and youth-focused radio programming production capacity; as well as support to interlocutor dialogue-towards- action initiatives that lay the groundwork for conflict transformation and peacebuilding within and between communities.

Search has developed strong partnerships in the *media sector* through a strategic partnership with the Catholic Radio Network (CRN), enabling our media programming to have a nation-wide reach. Search also works in partnership with *local and international organizations* such as the International Development Law Organization, the Initiative for Peace Communication Association, UNESCO, iHub and the Far Reaching Ministries to develop synergies based on complementary expertise.

Finally, Search works in close collaboration with **local authorities and local structures**, including local peace committees, local administrators and local leaders, representatives of ministries at the State level, such as the Ministry of Information and Communication, and within the armed forces the SPLA Chaplains group.

Leveraging its presence, toolbox and relationships, Search has achieved key successes that highlight the added value of Search to promote sustainable peace in South Sudan:

- In a volatile and violence-ridden context, Search used **creative strategies and media tools to reach hard-to-access locations and populations**, even when communities are inaccessible or people are displaced. When NGOs were forced to evacuate and suspend activities following the July 2016 violence, Search and its partner CRN were able to continue engaging with our target audience through the two radio programs that we jointly produce and broadcast, *Hiwar al-Shabab*, a youth-focused radio magazine program, and *Sergeant Esther*, a radio serial drama. These shows have been **hugely effective** – for example, one independent “treatment vs. control” evaluation found that 95% of listeners rejected violence, vs. only 80% of non-listeners.
- Search’s **approach of hyper-localized stabilization has proven effective**. In Eastern Equatoria, Search invested in the local government that had been divided by violent land disputes, facilitated the participation of community interlocutors and religious leaders from each community, and provided safe spaces for them to come together, discuss and rebuild peace. Search also supported the identification of common social, economic or livelihood interests that all communities relied on to build on commonalities and enhance social cohesion. As a result, in 2016, 36.5% of participants had ten or more weekly interactions with a member of another ethnic group, an increase of 25% in comparison to 2015.
- Search has been able to **successfully engage with security forces and start building bridges between military and civilian populations**. By working with the SPLA Chaplains’ Corps, Search seeks to build a network to shift the moral behavior of the troops. Search has worked with Chaplains on how they can use their public prayer sessions, one-to-one counselling with soldiers, and symbolic actions (visits to prisoners, the wounded) to shift behavior and promote cross-ethnic tolerance within the army; while also reaching out to the civilian community and traditional and religious leaders to become an entry point for victims of soldiers’ abuses.

Search’s Strengths

- ✓ Our reputation as an impartial international organization with a proven track record in conflict transformation in South Sudan;
- ✓ Our unique Common Ground Approach and tools to peacebuilding and conflict transformation, giving us access and space to work in volatile zones of the country;
- ✓ Our strategic partnership with CRN and media outlets across South Sudan, enabling Search to speak to the realities of thousands of people, including ‘hard-to-access’ locations and populations;
- ✓ Strong partnerships with reliable and credible local partners and institutions;
- ✓ Our expertise and track record in conflict analysis and ‘conflict scans’ and ‘youth-to-youth’ research methodologies; and
- ✓ Our trained and diverse team of experts, operating out of our Juba office.