

Youth Participation in the Peace Process in South Sudan

POLICY BRIEF

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Preface

This policy brief has been produced as part of the ‘Strengthening Young Women’s Participation in Local and National Peace Processes in South Sudan’ project, funded by the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund (UNPBF). Between December 2019 and September 2021, Search for Common Ground (Search) worked in partnership with an array of organizations in South Sudan, including AnaTaban, Crown the Woman, National Women’s Empowerment & Rehabilitation Organization, Catholic Radio Network, and Eye Radio, to enhance the engagement of young men and in particular, young women in South Sudan’s peace processes. The project aimed to strengthen the ability of young women leaders and groups to work together to lead local and national-level peace efforts, to transform attitudes and behaviours towards women and youth and their role in South Sudan’s peace processes and to contribute guidance, best practices and lessons learned to the global field of youth engagement in peace and security.

The following policy brief has been funded by the UNPBF and makes policy recommendations on how young people in South Sudan can become better engaged ***In the Room, Around the Room*** and ***Outside the Room***. In order to further enhance the engagement of young people in South Sudan’s peace processes, these recommendations should be adopted by International Non-Governmental Organizations such as Search for Common Ground, the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity, political parties, and Civil Society Organizations.

Executive Summary

South Sudan is emerging out of a brutal conflict that killed thousands and displaced millions of its citizens since the civil war broke out in 2013. The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed in 2018 following the collapse of the 2015 peace agreement. Despite their numerical strength, young people have been marginalized from participating in the peace process. This policy brief documents the progress made and identifies opportunities for youth participation in the peace process; capturing perspectives from different stakeholders that support youth participation.

The “We are Here” model¹, which outlines three layers or avenues of youth participation: ***in the room***, ***around the room***, and ***outside the room*** is adopted. **In the room:** With the push by the regional and international bodies like IGAD, TROIKA, AU, and advocacy by civil society organizations, more youth participated in the 2017/18 R-ARCSS than the 2014/15 ARCSS peace process. **Around the room:** youth coalitions, civil society forums, conferences were created to bolster youth participation and ensured more youth were able

¹ Altiook and Grizelj (2019). We Are Here: An integrated approach to youth-inclusive peace processes

to get in the room. **Outside the room:** the youth relied mainly on platforms such as the media to launch different campaigns that increase their participation. one example was the popular hashtag “#SouthSudanIsWatching” campaign by AnaTaban Arts Initiative on social media that raised a massive awareness of the ongoing R-ARCSS negotiations in 2017/18.

It is recommended that the Ministry of Youth and National Youth Union (NYU) establish youth peace platforms; one at the national level, and the others at local (State) level, with clear linkage to the one at the national level. The R-TGONU and political parties should remain committed to the R-ARCSS and enact the legislations to guarantee civic space and the role of the youth in governance and peace processes. International partners and CSOs should support the youth through both local and national level youth platforms to enable smooth and active youth participation.

1. Introduction

The Republic of South Sudan gained its independence on the 9th July 2011, and slid into political violence within two years of independence. A peace agreement was signed in 2015 but quickly collapsed as violence broke out again in 2016. The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) was signed in 2018, with more youth participation than in the 2015 peace process. More than 70 percent of the country’s population are under the age of 30 (World Bank, 2019)². South Sudan has no clear definition of the youth age bracket, however, according to the draft National Youth Policy (pending ratification), a youth is anyone aged 15 to 35 years.

There are no clear provisions and mechanisms within the policy and legal frameworks to ensure youth’s participation. The creation of the Ministry of Youth and Sports under R-ARCSS arrangement, and each State having a Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports is the right direction but inadequate for effective youth participation in peace processes. Despite their numerical strength, the youth are faced with limited opportunities to effectively contribute to the development and political stability of the country.

This policy brief reflects on the progress made and identifies opportunities for youth engagement in the peace processes. It has three objectives: 1. Reflect briefly on the progress made on youth participation and engagement in the negotiation and implementation of the R-ARCSS; 2. Identify the roles of key stakeholders and institutions that play a vital role in ensuring young people engage in implementation of the R-ARCSS; and 3. Propose avenues for building synergies and linkages on thematic interventions with focus on the impact of youth on the implementation of the R-ARCSS.

² World Bank (2019). The World Bank Annual Report 2019: Ending Poverty, Investing in Opportunity <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/32333>

The three-layer framework for analyzing youth participation in peace processes was adopted. ***In the room:*** the youth participate within formal peace architecture and structures, inside the room during negotiations and political dialogues; ***Around the room:*** the youth are not directly in the room, but close to the peace process and connected (able to get in the room or influence negotiations) through formal or informal mechanisms; and ***Outside the room:*** youth are involved through informal engagement or alternative mechanisms that seek to bring the voices of youth to the peace negotiation table and implementation.

2. Overview of the research or problem

The gaps addressed in this policy brief relate with lack of clear provisions and mechanisms within the policy and legal frameworks to ensure youth participation. The existing institutions such as the Ministry of Youth, and each State having a Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports are inadequate for effective youth participation in peace processes. The youth continue to be marginalized and excluded in the peace process, despite their numerical strength as a segment of the country's total population and the fact that they bear the full brunt of war. However, the policy brief recognizes the existing efforts to include the youth in peace processes, however limited they may be.

3. Policy Discussion and Findings

Youth inclusion and participation in South Sudan peace process

The three layers of the adopted framework: ***In the room***, ***Around the room***, and ***Outside the room***: as explained above, are used to guide the reflections on the findings.

IN THE ROOM: with the support from regional bodies and civil society organizations, there was increased youth participation in the peace process of 2018 compared to 2015. Other stakeholders like the political parties were able to participate and leveraged the feedback sessions to articulate their concerns. The direct participation of the youth was essential in shaping the conversation in the peace process and influenced desired outcomes and benefits to the majority of the citizens. Issues like governance, security, and social cohesion were brought to the negotiation table. and social cohesion.

AROUND THE ROOM: the young people were not directly in the room, but were close to the peace agreement and connected (able to get in the room or influence negotiations) through formal or informal mechanisms. The non-political networks such as the National Youth Union (NYU), South Sudan Civil Society Forum (SSCSF), Youth Organizations Coalition (YOC), Universities and Church institutions provided necessary avenues for the youth to advance their voices. The networks also offered technical support for the youth

to gain access to the peace process. Working through coalitions, the youth participated in advocacy for affirmative action for women and youth and were able to attract the attention of the government bureaucracies and political elites to respond to the voices of all the affected parties.

OUTSIDE THE ROOM: through active engagement using the media, the voices of the youth were brought to the negotiation table during the negotiation and implementation of the peace process. Media campaigns that increased access to information were launched; while peace festivals and camps were used as an important avenue in preaching messages of peace. International NGOs such as Search for Common Grounds (SFCG), Oxfam and Norwegian People Aid (NPA) created spaces for youth participation in the peace process; provided training and access to information; and also funded youth groups to build capacity for effective engagement in the peace processes. Regional and international platforms like UN, AU and IGAD also advocated for an increased space for youth participation in the peace process.

Avenues for building synergies and linkages

Besides Government, international and regional bodies, political parties, civil society organizations, and church institutions offer essential avenues for building synergies. They support the youth to develop strategies for increased participation in the peace process. Media platforms, especially the social media, offer a useful and significant space around and outside the room. Useful information and strategies, press statements, and key policy documents are shared. Urban youth participate more in the peace process than their rural counterparts, which can be addressed through improved access to information. Capacity building for adult community members and institutions too is vital so that they understand how to engage better. Collaboration with civic actors and line governmental institutions like the rule of law institutions, national and state ministries of gender, child and social welfare and legislative committees is key as a strategy for youth participation.

Challenges for effective youth engagement

Youth participation in the peace processes is constrained by limited civic and political opportunities for youth empowerment; leadership incapacity among the youth for grassroots mobilization and engagement in peace building; and negative energies among youth that can easily be mobilized for negative outcomes. Insecurity at national and subnational levels continue to affect the participation of youth in peace building. Violent incidents at the subnational level and persistent security threats resulting from the road ambushes, cattle raiding, inter-communal violence, revenge killings and lawlessness across the country impede youth participation in peacebuilding.

Peace interlocutors are difficult to mobilize, while political leaders are not readily available to dialogue with youth. Media houses are faced with difficulty to coordinate high-profile persons from the government as they often turn down the commitment to participate in youth empowerment programs.

Negative social and cultural norms impede youth participation in peace building. Youth structures at the local level are formed and influenced by tribal interests and division among youth based on political and tribal lines, which threatens collective bargaining power of the youth. Besides, youth have high expectations and demands against limited opportunities for empowerment. Platforms that nurture and coordinate the participation of the youth in peace processes are still limited. The efforts of the youth are not adequately directed towards common goals and objectives aimed at promoting peace and development.

Inadequate funding and technical support for youth in advocacy affect their participation in monitoring the implementation of the peace agreement. Bureaucracies within some funding intermediaries, in addition to mismanagement and preferential treatment, promote unhealthy competition among youth institutions. This is a major barrier to youth engagement in peace monitoring and implementation of R-ARCSS. Limitations in transport and communication also deny the youth the opportunity to engage in the peace processes. This is worse in the face of limited skills in the use of virtual technology, which excluded the youth, especially from the rural settings. This limits coordination and information sharing among youth leaders and groups.

4. Conclusions

The youth are a vital agency that has shaped and contributed in many ways to the peace process. This forms a strong foundation to build on and achieve their maximum participation and engagement. Maximum participation of the youth in the peace processes requires concerted support as a global and continental requirement for countries emerging from conflict. The R-ARCSS should guarantee progress in youth participation, as a majority population and also as active perpetrators of violence. Building networks and coalitions is key for the youth to effectively influence the peace process. The setbacks limiting youth inclusion and participation must be effectively addressed through inter-stakeholder engagement.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are necessary for increasing youth participation in the peace process.

In the room:

- ➔ The government, through the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the National Youth Union (NYU) should establish and support youth peace platforms; one at the national level, and the others at local (State) levels, with clear linkage to the one at the national level. The R-TGONU and political parties should remain committed to the R-ARCSS and enact the legislation to guarantee civic space and the role of the

youth in governance and peace processes. International partners and CSOs should support the youth through both local and national level youth platforms to enable smooth and active youth participation.

Around the room:

- ➔ Youth platforms such as the National Youth Union, South Sudan Civil Society Forum, and Youth Organizations Coalition should uphold their commitment to support youth participation. They should strengthen coalitions and seek support from government and regional and international bodies in support of their activism for maximum participation of the youth. Working through coalitions, the youth will continue to attract the attention of government bureaucracies and political elites to respond to the voices of all the affected parties.

Outside the room:

- ➔ Effective use of the media is key for enabling youth voices to gain access to the negotiation table during the negotiation and implementation of the peace process. International NGOs such as Search for Common Grounds (SFCG), Oxfam and Norwegian People Aid (NPA) should support this effort and create more spaces for youth participation in the peace process. Support should be channeled through the national and state-level youth platforms for capacity, relevance and continued engagement.

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