

CIVIL SOCIETY EMPOWERMENT BY UNMISS AS A PEACEBUILDING STRATEGY IN THE POST-CONFLICT CONTEXT OF SOUTH SUDAN

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Abstract

South Sudan, as the world's youngest country that gained independence in 2011, has often been plunged into severe internal conflicts, including civil wars in 2013 and 2016, which left more than 9 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. Although the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was established to protect civilians and support the peace process, the effectiveness of this mission is often questioned, especially regarding its failure to respond to the violence in Juba in 2016. This study aims to analyze UNMISS's strategy in empowering civil society as part of its peace building efforts, as well as the challenges and implications for sustainable peace, with the hope of providing a more comprehensive insight into the role of civil society in social reconciliation and peace building, as well as recommendations for international policy in peace missions in other post-conflict countries. This research is qualitative research with a literature study design, which is used to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena occurring in the post-conflict context, particularly regarding UNMISS's strategy in empowering civil society and its impact on peace building. A literature study was used to collect, analyze, and evaluate various secondary sources relevant to the research topic, such as scientific articles, UN reports, policy documents, and literature related to peace building and civil society empowerment.

Keywords: Civil society, *peace building*, sustainable peace, UNMISS

INTRODUCTION

South Sudan is the world's youngest country, having gained independence from the Republic of Sudan in 2011. However, the transition to a stable and peaceful country has proven challenging. Just two years after independence, the country plunged back into internal conflict triggered by a power struggle among political elites and exacerbated by ethnic tensions. This crisis culminated in the outbreak of civil war in 2013 and worsened again in 2016. The recurring armed conflict created a severe humanitarian crisis, with significant impacts on the safety, well-being, and dignity of civilians. According to a report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA, 2023), more than 9 million people or about 76% of the total national population (South Sudan) are in need of humanitarian assistance. Among them, around

2.3 million people are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and another 2.2 million are seeking refuge in neighboring countries.

In response to this situation, the United Nations Security Council established the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) through Resolution 1996 (2011). The mission's initial mandate was expanded through Resolution 2155 (2014), focusing on three main pillars: (1) protection of civilians, (2) monitoring and reporting human rights violations, and (3) support for the national peace process (Council U.S., 2014). However, the effectiveness of UNMISS's implementation of its civilian protection mandate has been the subject of criticism and debate. The UN Independent Special Investigation in South Sudan (2017) report highlights UNMISS's failure to respond effectively to the July 2016 violence in Juba, which left more than 300 people dead and thousands more displaced (Council U. N., 2017). The report noted weak preparedness, a lack of coordination between military and civilian components of the mission, and a slow response to real threats to civilians.

Furthermore, between 2023 and early 2024, reports from the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect (2024) noted an increase in armed violence against civilians in several areas such as Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile. This violence includes burning houses, rape, looting, and mass killings, which peacekeeping forces have often been unable to prevent. Although UNMISS claims to have provided temporary protection to more than one million people (UNMISS, 2022), various parties consider the approach taken to be reactive and lacking in strategy. Some civil society organizations even consider the UN's presence to be passive, calling it a "*bystander with resources*" rather than an active protector of the community (Saferworld, 2021).

From an academic perspective, a number of studies have highlighted various structural obstacles in UN peacekeeping missions, such as command fragmentation, dependence on troop-contributing countries (TCCs), and limited legitimacy in the eyes of local communities (Howard, 2019); (Karlsrud, 2015). Negative perceptions of UNMISS as a symbol of external intervention that has failed to meet expectations for security and justice have further weakened the mission's effectiveness. In this context, civil society plays an important role as an agent of peace at the grassroots level. Their presence is not only important in promoting reconciliation and social recovery, but also in building post-conflict community resilience. Recognizing this importance, UNMISS has adopted a peace building approach based on civil society empowerment in recent years. This strategy includes training, facilitating cross-community dialogue, strengthening the capacity of civil society organizations, and involving citizens in local decision-making processes.

However, the effectiveness of this empowerment strategy is not without challenges, such as limited institutional capacity, the complexity of post-conflict political dynamics, and the still weak social cohesion at the community level. Therefore, it is important to critically examine the extent to which UNMISS's civil society

empowerment strategy can contribute to the achievement of sustainable peace building goals, particularly within the framework of post-conflict recovery and human security.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research approach using a literature review design to analyze the role of civil society empowerment in strengthening the Protection of Civilians (PoC) within the context of post-conflict peacebuilding in South Sudan. A qualitative approach is appropriate as this research seeks to develop an in-depth and interpretive understanding of complex social and institutional dynamics, particularly the interaction between international peacekeeping actors and local communities.

The research relies on a systematic literature review to collect, classify, and critically analyze secondary data. The sources include academic journal articles, books, policy reports, and institutional publications. These sources were selected based on their relevance to key themes, including peacekeeping effectiveness, PoC implementation, and civil society engagement in post-conflict settings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Presence of UNMISS in South Sudan

The causes and background of the *United Nations Mission in South Sudan* (UNMISS) can be seen through the long history of conflict in Sudan, which ended with the formation of a new country, South Sudan. For decades, Sudan was divided by internal conflict involving fierce fighting between the northern and southern parts of the country. Factors that triggered the conflict included political change, competition for natural resources, especially oil, and ethnic and religious differences between different groups in the two regions (Johnson, 2016). Amid prolonged tensions, peace efforts continued, one of which was through the *Comprehensive Peace Agreement* (CPA) in 2005, which became a turning point in the resolution of the conflict. The CPA ended the Second Sudanese Civil War and granted South Sudan full autonomy for six years under the supervision of a peacekeeping mission known as the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) (Young, 2012).

According to the UNMIS report (2011), as part of the agreement, a referendum was held which resulted in almost unanimous support (98.83%) for the independence of South Sudan. On July 9, 2011, South Sudan officially declared its independence, and the country was accepted as the 193rd member of the United Nations (UN) on July 14, 2011 (United Nations, 2011). This acceptance symbolized the success of the South Sudanese people's long struggle for sovereignty. With the establishment of this new country, the UN Security Council ended the UNMIS mandate through Resolution 1997 (2011) and formed a new mission, UNMISS, dedicated to South Sudan.

UNMISS was established through UN Security Council Resolution 1996 (2011) on July 8, 2011, one day before South Sudan's declaration of independence. The mission was established with a focus on peace building, rather than peace enforcement, with the aim of helping South Sudan build the capacity of its new state, prevent further internal conflict, protect civilians, and reform the security sector and law enforcement (United Nations Security Council, 2011a). At the beginning of its assignment, UNMISS utilized the transition of personnel and assets from UNMIS, which had previously been in the southern region. Since then, UNMISS has operated with more than 17,000 personnel as of February 2023, including military, police, and civilian staff spread across South Sudan, with headquarters in Juba and several bases in other states (United Nations, 2023).

However, over time, South Sudan's domestic political situation began to deteriorate, especially after President Salva Kiir fell out with former Vice President Riek Machar, triggering the country's second civil war in December 2013. This crisis led to major changes in the priorities of the UNMISS mission. Through Resolution 2155 (2014), the UN Security Council directed the mission to focus more on *the Protection of Civilians* (PoC) and the establishment of PoC sites, which temporarily housed more than 200,000 internally displaced persons (United Nations Security Council, 2014). With this change in focus, UNMISS also had to carry out humanitarian roles, in addition to its long-term peace building tasks.

In subsequent developments, the signing of *the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan* (R-ARCSS) in 2018 reopened opportunities for the integration of the peace building mandate into UNMISS operations. Recent resolutions, such as Resolution 2729 (2024), now affirm four main priorities for UNMISS, namely (1) protection of civilians, (2) creation of conditions conducive to humanitarian assistance, (3) monitoring and reporting human rights violations, and (4) supporting the peace process, including facilitating elections (United Nations Security Council, 2024).

The presence of UNMISS plays a strategic role for both South Sudan and the international community. At the national level, UNMISS serves as a security buffer and reconciliation facilitator, as well as a driver of civil society empowerment, which is the foundation for the development of this new country. At the international level, UNMISS is a test of the effectiveness of multidimensional UN missions in the context of fragile post-conflict countries. This mission is an important case study on the interaction between peacekeeping and peace building in addressing the complexities of internal conflict in a new country that is building peace and stability.

UNMISS Strategy in Civil Society Empowerment

UNMISS has positioned the strengthening of civil society organizations (CSOs) and the creation of inclusive dialogue spaces as key pillars of its mandate to build sustainable peace in South Sudan. Through a series of training sessions, workshops, and public consultation forums, UNMISS encourages CSOs to not only be beneficiaries of the peace process, but also key actors who influence policy and manage conflict peacefully.

The capacity building program facilitated by UNMISS focuses on improving advocacy, mediation, and political participation skills. Training materials cover conflict root cause analysis, effective advocacy messaging, community-based mediation techniques, resource mobilization, and the use of legal and policy frameworks to fight for community rights. Some training uses a *Training of Trainers* (ToT) approach so that trained participants can train their communities on an ongoing basis, ensuring replication and sustainability of impact at the local level.

In addition to technical training, UNMISS actively facilitates inclusive dialogue between civil society, security forces, local leaders, and local governments. These forums aim to build trust, reduce polarization, and develop joint solutions to conflicts. The dialogues are conducted through face-to-face meetings at the village and district levels, interactive broadcasts on Radio Miraya, and thematic workshops on topics such as child protection advocacy, women's participation in politics, and strengthening the role of persons with disabilities in decision-making.

The results of this integrated initiative not only improve the technical capabilities of CSOs, but also expand cross-actor collaboration networks, strengthen local conflict early detection mechanisms, and create community-led mediation and reconciliation mechanisms. In the long- , this capacity building contributes to peace consolidation, prevention of recurring conflicts, governance reform, and socio-economic empowerment of post-conflict communities.

Through a combination of capacity building and inclusive dialogue, UNMISS ensures that the peace process in South Sudan is participatory and based on local *ownership*. This strategy transforms CSOs from mere complements to international programs into key drivers in building peace, fighting for social justice, and fostering strong social cohesion.

1. Capacity Building and Inclusive Dialogue

Capacity building and inclusive dialogue are key pillars of UNMISS's mandate to build sustainable peace in the country. UNMISS focuses on empowering civil society organizations (CSOs) by implementing various training programs, dialogues, and workshops aimed at improving advocacy skills, conflict mediation, and political participation. This strategy aims to create a space for dialogue between civil society, security forces, and local governments, with the hope of building trust and collaboration in the peace process.

UNMISS facilitates training and workshops to improve the technical capacity of CSOs. This training includes developing skills in advocacy, conflict mediation, and effective political participation. In 2021, UNMISS launched a training program using a *Training of Trainers* (ToT) approach, involving more than 100 participants from various CSOs in South Sudan. These ToT participants then retrained their local communities, ensuring the sustainability and replication of the training's impact at the local level (United Nations, 2021).

This training program focused on teaching conflict root cause analysis, which helped CSOs understand the underlying causes of conflicts that frequently occur in South Sudan. In addition, the training also covers the formulation of effective advocacy messages, resource mobilization, and the use of legal and policy frameworks to fight for the rights of the people (UNMISS, 2020). In this context, the training aims not only to improve technical capacity, but also to facilitate collaboration and synergy between civil society and local government.

As part of its capacity-building program, UNMISS also actively facilitates inclusive dialogue between civil society, security forces, and local governments. This process is carried out with the aim of building trust, reducing polarization, and creating joint solutions to conflicts occurring at the local level. For example, UNMISS has held more than 100 dialogue sessions between communities and security forces, involving community leaders, religious leaders, and government representatives.

According to a report by Interpeace (2022), this inclusive dialogue initiative has helped reduce tensions between ethnic groups that were previously involved in sectarian violence. In addition to face-to-face meetings, UNMISS also utilizes local media, such as Radio Miraya, to reach a wider audience. This radio station is used to broadcast programs that facilitate dialogue between civil society and security forces, as well as to provide relevant information about peace, human rights, and government policies (Interpeace, 2022).

UNMISS also facilitates dialogue at the village and district levels with the aim of encouraging communities to resolve tensions peacefully. These dialogue forums involve various parties, such as local leaders, community leaders, and local governments, who work together to find solutions to existing problems. In addition, UNMISS also provides training to community leaders on how to be effective mediators in resolving local conflicts (United Nations, 2022).

This program has proven effective in building mutual trust at the local level. For example, a study by The Carter Center (2021) shows that more than 70% of participants in dialogue sessions facilitated by UNMISS reported an increase in trust between security forces and local communities. This indicates that inclusive dialogue can strengthen relationships between civil society and authorities, which in turn accelerates the reconciliation process.

The capacity-building and inclusive dialogue programs implemented by UNMISS have made a significant contribution to stability and peace in South Sudan. According to a report from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2023), this program has played a role in improving the capacity of CSOs to act as mediators in resolving local conflicts and fighting for the rights of the community. More than 30% of the communities involved in this program reported a decrease in incidents of violence and an increase in participation in political processes and decision-making (UNDP, 2023).

In addition, UNMISS has also succeeded in strengthening cross-actor collaboration networks involving local organizations, local governments, and international actors. This collaboration not only increases the effectiveness of empowerment programs but also ensures the sustainability of peace initiatives (United Nations, 2024).

2. Protection and Empowerment of Vulnerable Groups

UNMISS prioritizes the protection of vulnerable groups, including women and children, through programs that encourage their participation in the political process and peace building. These efforts also include leadership and advocacy training for women so that their voices are better heard in decision-making.

The UNMISS Child Protection Unit monitors and reports violations against children, including the recruitment and use of children in conflict, the killing or injuring of children, rape or other sexual violence against children, attacks on schools or hospitals, the abduction of children, and the denial of humanitarian access to children. Since 2015, UNMISS has supported the release and reintegration of more than 3,600 children (3,177 boys and 433 girls) from armed groups and other armed groups in South Sudan. These protection and empowerment efforts also include the establishment of a special task force in Jonglei State to coordinate the prevention of and response to gender-based violence, including sexual violence. This task force was formed through discussions between the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Welfare and the UNMISS Gender Unit, with the aim of strengthening the capacity of relevant authorities to effectively handle cases of gender-based violence. Through this holistic and inclusive approach, UNMISS seeks to create a safe and supportive environment for women and children to actively participate in the peace and development process in South Sudan.

3. Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) & Security Sector Reform (SSR)

The civil society empowerment strategy is also realized through DDR and SSR programs, which aim to reduce the number of armed groups, reintegrate former combatants into society, and strengthen inclusive and accountable security institutions. In July 2024, a consultative meeting was held in Juba to validate the strategic guidelines for the operational guidelines from the African Union on DDR and SSR. The meeting involved various stakeholders, including the government, civil society organizations,

women's organizations, and academics, to ensure that the reform process reflects the needs and aspirations of civil society.

UNMISS also organized workshops in Unity State and the Ruweng Administrative Area to strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations in the areas of peace and democracy. These workshops aimed to increase understanding of the rights, roles, and responsibilities of citizens in democratic participation, especially ahead of South Sudan's first post-independence elections. A total of 66 participants, including 17 women, attended interactive sessions that discussed advocacy skills, coalition building, networking, and resource mobilization.

UNMISS emphasizes the importance of integrating a gender perspective into the DDR and SSR processes. This is in line with UN Security Council Resolution No. 1325, which calls for increased participation of women in peace and security processes. UNMISS works with the government and civil society organizations to ensure that women have an equal role in the security sector reform and reintegration of former combatants processes. UNMISS has adopted a community-based approach to DDR implementation, known as "Second Generation DDR." This approach involves communities in the reintegration of ex-combatants through *Community Violence Reduction (CVR)* programs. These programs aim to reduce violence and strengthen social cohesion by engaging communities in activities that support peace and development. UNMISS works with various partners to support the implementation of CVR throughout South Sudan.

Despite significant efforts in implementing DDR and SSR, challenges remain. The demobilization and reintegration of former combatants faces obstacles such as lack of resources, political instability, and challenges in building trust between communities and security institutions. Evaluations of these programs indicate the need for a more inclusive and evidence-based approach to ensure their sustainability and effectiveness.

4. Facilitation of Local Dialogue and Conflict Resolution

UNMISS actively facilitates local dialogue to resolve inter-community conflicts, build community-based conflict resolution mechanisms, and strengthen social cohesion. This approach has proven effective in reducing levels of violence and increasing trust between groups.

UNMISS actively facilitates inter-community dialogue to resolve conflicts, as seen in Yei River County, where local leaders developed guidelines for peace committees to enhance reconciliation and development cooperation. These committees are responsible for designing early warning mechanisms, organizing peace and reconciliation forums for mediating conflicts between clans and families, and helping to resolve land disputes between returning refugees and host communities.

In addition, UNMISS launched a "*Community Sensitization and Civic Education Campaign*" in Central Equatoria State to promote community engagement in political,

peace, and electoral processes. The campaign aims to increase citizen awareness and participation in gender-responsive constitution-making and electoral processes, involving civil society networks and government officials. In Eastern Equatoria State, UNMISS supported the Community-Based Violence Reduction Program (CVRP), which provided vocational skills training to 107 youth, including 35 women, to increase their income opportunities and prevent their involvement in conflict. The program aims to empower youth with skills that can increase economic independence and reduce the potential for violence. Through this community-based approach, UNMISS seeks to strengthen civil society's capacity to resolve conflicts peacefully and build sustainable peace in South Sudan.

5. Collaboration with Local and International Actors

UNMISS works with local organizations, governments, and international partners to expand the reach of empowerment programs, ensure sustainability, and increase the effectiveness of interventions. UNMISS works with more than 200 civil society organizations across South Sudan to build alliances and increase civic education and participation in election monitoring. These partnerships aim to ensure that the existing political space reflects a shared vision for a more just future.

UNMISS supports local initiatives such as the establishment of a Peace Committee in Yei River County, which aims to enhance reconciliation and development cooperation between communities. The committee is responsible for designing early warning mechanisms, organizing peace and reconciliation forums for mediation of conflicts between clans and families, and helping to resolve land disputes between returning refugees and host communities.

UNMISS also works with the Government of South Sudan and international partners on security sector reform and *disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration* (DDR). In July 2024, a consultative meeting was held in Juba to validate strategic guidelines and share operational guidance from the African Union on DDR and SSR. This meeting involved various stakeholders, including the government, civil society organizations, women's organizations, and academics, to ensure that the reform process reflects the needs and aspirations of civil society. Through this collaboration, UNMISS seeks to strengthen the capacity of civil society to resolve conflicts peacefully and build sustainable peace in South Sudan.

One of the strategies implemented by UNMISS as a peace building effort is to increase the contribution and empowerment of women. Data from the International Labor Organization from 2023 to 2025 states that of all women in South Sudan, only 13% of them have formal jobs, which is mentioned as one of the causes of economic insecurity for these women (UNMISS, 2025) . In this regard, UNMISS held a communication strategy workshop for 30 South Sudanese women (UNMISS, 2025) . This workshop focused on the continuation of the commitment previously agreed upon

in 2018, namely the Revitalized Peace Agreement, which discusses the 35% participation of women in South Sudanese government institutions (UNMISS, 2025) . This workshop is expected to inspire enthusiasm, motivation, and knowledge among South Sudanese women to lead and make their voices heard.

Another strategy implemented by UNMISS is to hold a workshop that will be attended by 60 students in South Sudan from various schools for two days (UNMISS, 2023) . The purpose of this workshop is to train young people in South Sudan so that they can find ways to overcome potential tensions that may arise or reconcile existing tensions (UNMISS, 2023) . This is certainly very important to train because the participation of young people in reducing violence is crucial in South Sudan. Other training is also provided to young people, such as how to deal with differences in daily life, as well as knowledge about the concepts of human rights and children's rights (UNMISS, 2023) . All of these things are considered to be the foundation for young people in South Sudan so that in practice they can all participate in maintaining peace in their social communities and schools. This action is believed to be a very helpful step in the peace building process in South Sudan.

Another action taken by UNMISS in its peace building efforts is to establish 10 community-based protection networks, which will help the government respond more quickly and effectively to any threats that arise (UN, 2025) . Through this, UNMISS will assist local communities in South Sudan by providing skills and tools to better protect themselves by preventing conflict, resolving grievances, and building their own peace. UNMISS will also provide psychosocial support and access to services for communities in South Sudan (UN, 2025) . In addition, UNMISS will help displaced communities to receive treatment and healing (UN, 2025) .

This action is actually a response from UNMISS to the complaints made by Awut Mabior, a mother and leader in Warrap, a region in South Sudan. Awut Mabior believes that all South Sudanese people, especially women and children, have long suffered from the conflict and are demanding justice. As part of its response, UNMISS has established this community with the aim of strengthening protection for the community, improving accountability mechanisms for past atrocities, and creating a safe and open public space where the community can participate in government governance , policy-making, and decision-making (UN, 2025) . The community built by UNMISS is also expected to be used to control security, so that when violence occurs, it can be responded to quickly. This community can also encourage reconciliation between communities that are in conflict (UN, 2025) .

Another strategy implemented by UNMISS is to hold training for 80 people from nine different communities (UNMISS, 2025) . This training is organized by UNMISS in collaboration with the Independent Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation Commission and the State Ministry of Peacebuilding and will take place in Lobonok (UNMISS, 2025) . The training lasts for two full days and focuses on conflict management and skills

training for peaceful conflict resolution. Participants will learn how to identify conflicts early on, gain knowledge about the important role of women in peace building, and learn how to resolve problems peacefully. The training is not only classroom-based but also includes hands-on practice to simulate real-life situations.

CONCLUSION

The importance of civil society empowerment by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in peace building efforts in South Sudan. As a newly independent post-conflict country, South Sudan faces enormous challenges in creating sustainable peace. The presence of UNMISS as part of international intervention plays a vital role in the protection of civilians and the process of social reconciliation, despite criticism regarding the operational effectiveness of this mission.

Through its civil society empowerment program, UNMISS has successfully built the capacity of civil society organizations (CSOs) and strengthened their role in the peace process. Training, dialogue facilitation, and strengthening political participation are the main pillars of this mission. Strategies based on capacity building and inclusive dialogue have succeeded in creating space for civil society to play an active role in the reconciliation process, reducing social tensions, and building cohesion between communities.

However, challenges remain, particularly regarding institutional capacity, post-conflict political dynamics, and public trust in international missions. Nevertheless, civil society empowerment through participatory, locally-owned approaches has contributed significantly to stability and long-term peace building.

Therefore, this study recommends that UNMISS and other international peace missions strengthen their collaboration with civil society and integrate local perspectives into their policies to achieve more inclusive and sustainable peace in post-conflict countries.

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