

# South Sudan's December 2013 conflict: Bolting state-building fault lines with social capital

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## **Abstract**

The December 2013 violent conflict in South Sudan, the world's newest and most fragile state, has shown that a state-building trajectory that only emphasises formal institutional development is not viable. Like any state at its formative stage, formal institutions in South Sudan have demonstrated limited capacity to meet the high demands by citizens for 'peace or post-secession' dividends. The state's limited capacity has further been eroded by political constructs claiming ethnic supremacy by both the Dinka and Nuer, the main parties to the December 2013 conflict. This article argues that the entitlement tied to post-secession dividends claims by the Dinka and Nuer has (re)produced a generally volatile social space for South Sudan by defining the mode of political settlement of the state, and undermining the generation of social capital for conflict management in the society. By constructing a nexus between state-building and social capital, this article shows that the state-building process in South Sudan requires the hybridity of formal and informal institutions. This helps in transforming the volatile social space created through the supremacy constructs of the Dinka and Nuer and high citizen demands placed on the fragile state.

**Keywords:** State-building, social capital, ethnic supremacy, Dinka, Nuer, South Sudan

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## Introduction

South Sudan is officially the most fragile state in the world according to the Fragile States Index 2014. The newest state in the world was indeed poised for significant political problems right from the onset. The deadly conflict that began on 15 December 2013 in the country has killed thousands of people and displaced more than 1 500 000, with significant humanitarian consequences. The violence that has threatened the very existence of the barely three year-old independent state is only the height of the political difficulties that South Sudan has experienced, even before its inception as a formal state. Under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Compromise Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan was signed on 26 August 2015 between the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO), the main parties to the conflict. As of 12 November 2015, both parties had violated the Permanent Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements (IGAD 2015), signifying a difficult pathway to political order in South Sudan.

Whilst current literature on the conflict has mostly focused on elite politics and the ethnic dimensions (De Waal 2014; International Crisis Group 2014; Pinaud 2014), it is important to transcend these analyses by examining the mode of political settlement that the state-building process has produced. This enables us to understand the levels of vulnerability of the communities in South Sudan, which, as we shall later see in this article, have made it easier to mobilise people for violence rather than for the adoption of peaceful 'coping' mechanisms for survival. Luka Biong Deng (2010), Ann Laudati (2011) and Clémence Pinaud (2014) offer useful insight on how large elements of social capital in South Sudan were dismantled while other forms of social capital were created during the civil war. However, their analyses fail to show how social capital can constitute an important element of state-building, and how the process of state-building itself, can in fact become detrimental to social capital development.

The state-building trajectory embraced by South Sudan has emphasised the development of the formal institutional capacity of the state, which takes a long time to respond to the basic needs of the citizens. In this article, the concept of state-building is drawn from Richard Caplan (2004:53) who defines it as 'a set of actions undertaken by actors, whether national or international, to establish, reform and strengthen state institutions where these have been eroded or are missing'. South Sudan had a semblance of these institutions during the six-year transition period stipulated by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), spearheaded by IGAD, that was reached on 9 January 2005. This ended the 1983–2005 civil war that had pitted the Government of Sudan (GoS) against the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A)<sup>1</sup>. At independence in July 2011 the institutions inherited were embryonic and understandably weak in light of the long civil war.

Paradoxically, the very process of strengthening the weak institutions in South Sudan has in itself become a vehicle for the depletion of social capital, which is a key ingredient for state-building and sustainable peace. Social capital is the instantiated informal norm that promotes cooperation in a society based on embedded trust (Fukuyama 2001:7). It forms an important element in promoting cohesion in society by mobilising people towards the achievement of collective ends, hence complementing the formal institutional goals of the state (Colletta and Cullen 2000; Sawyer 2005; World Bank 2011).

This article contends that the ideological constructs of ethnic supremacy by the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups have defined the mode of political settlement in South Sudan through state capture. These constructs of supremacy have been mobilised to sustain claims for post-secession dividends, thereby undermining the generation of social capital for conflict management in the society. By constructing a nexus between state-building and social capital, the article shows that the state-building process

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1 SPLM was the political wing of the rebel movement while SPLA was the military wing. Upon signing of the CPA, SPLM transformed to a political party while the SPLA became the official army of South Sudan.

in South Sudan requires the hybridity of formal and informal institutions. This helps in transforming the volatile social space created through the supremacy constructs of the Dinka and Nuer and the high demands placed by citizens on the fragile state.

After this introduction, the next section of this article builds a theoretical link between state-building and social capital within the prism of conflict management in society. The article then reviews the emergence of the state of South Sudan and the December 2013 conflict and demonstrates the weakness of the state-building strategy. From the foregoing, the article proceeds with a discussion of how political constructs by both Dinka and Nuer that justify ethnic supremacy have cultivated a form of socio-political dominance. This has contributed to the depletion of social capital and the creation of volatile social spaces within society. This discussion is followed by a section that suggests revisiting the current state-building strategy by integrating social capital, and then a conclusion.

### **The nexus between state-building and social capital**

State-building has increasingly become a focus of international development discourse in a diametric departure from the past where an anti-statist stance occupied the development paradigm as embodied by the Washington Consensus. The proliferation of intra-state conflicts in developing countries with the attendant regionalised externalities, particularly during the first decade of the post-cold war era (Marshall and Gurr 2005), led to the perceived need to shift the focus to building states which are resilient to the deadly conflicts that had engulfed a considerable number of countries in the past. This is particularly the case for Africa, which has experienced numerous intra-state conflicts, more than any other continent (Straus 2012:180).

The conception of the state in this article is drawn from Max Weber who defines the state as a human community that (successfully) claims a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory (Weber 1946:77). The overarching priority of state-building must therefore

be to craft a form of political governance and the articulation of a set of political processes or mechanisms through which the state and society reconcile their expectations of one another (OECD 2008). Challenging as this may be, attaining this objective is important for the endurance of the legitimacy of the state. There is a shared understanding that state-building is about controlling violence, establishing legitimacy and building capable and responsive institutions so as to create or foster a shared sense of the public realm (Menocal and Fritz 2007). To make these ends achievable, the state must *a priori* act in relative autonomy in deploying its infrastructural power by organising society in the interest of citizens in their generality (Mann 1984). The inherent challenge, however, is that most citizens as principal recipients of the dividends (mostly social and economic) of state-building tend to have high expectations of the state especially during the aftermath of independence or in the post-conflict period (Menocal 2011). Yet experience has shown that state-building can only realise tangible dividends over the long-term, as the process is inevitably conflict-ridden (Menocal 2011).

The process of reconciling societal expectations and the state's [lack of] capacity to meet these expectations, a process that establishes the nature of the political settlement, remains one of the most daunting endeavours of any state-building enterprise. Political settlement is the balance or distribution of power between contending social groups and social classes, on which any state is based (Di John and Putzel 2009; Khan 1995). Even though the vision of how the state should be constructed or function is often an elitist bargaining process (Di John and Putzel 2009), the necessary legitimacy that undergirds state-building can be sustained only if a shared understanding on political settlement is not limited to the political class but extended to the masses. This presupposes a democratic as opposed to a Marxist trajectory of state-building. The Marxist approach to state-building is defined by its focus on class struggles in which the dominant class seeks to sustain its ascendancy through state capture (Hellman et al. 2000). On the other hand, the democratic track to state-building is essentially inclusive, with various constitutive elements of the society

taken into account. Failure to forge a shared understanding of how the state should function may result in some groups or individuals mobilising their own vision of the state-society relationship and being driven to pursue it through alternative means, including violence (Zartman 1989).

While there is agreement that institutions matter because they can mediate societal differences and manage conflicts, the existing literature on state-building offers no consensus on the most suitable institutions to achieve this, including in post-conflict settings (Horowitz 2008; Wolff 2011). Understandably, the contextual complexities vary considerably and it would be naïve to proffer a one-size-fits-all institutional trajectory for building states. State-building (or state formation as the embryonic stage) is indeed complex, non-linear and replete with unintended outcomes.

That said, a major weakness in most policy trajectories on state-building is that they tend to emphasise formal institutional development to the detriment of informal institutions (Boege et al. 2008). The prominence accorded to these formal institutions is due to their presumed substantial ability to mediate delicate state-society relationships. Yet the political settlement which is at the core of state-building includes not only 'formal institutions adapted or created to manage politics - such as electoral processes, parliaments, constitutions and truth commissions, many of which may be the direct result of peacebuilding efforts - but also, crucially, the often informal and unarticulated political arrangements and understandings that underpin a political system' (Menocal 2011:1721). This underscores the importance of social capital in managing conflicts in society and the need for it to be taken into account in the creation of a sustainable political order.

Where state capacity is under extreme stress, with a weak grip over the monopoly of legitimate use of force within its territory, experience in other post-conflict settings such as Afghanistan, Cambodia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Uganda and Rwanda has shown that social capital can be an important resource for conflict management in society (Colletta and Cullen 2000; Sawyer 2005; Sanginga et al. 2007; World Bank 2011). All these empirical

cases demonstrate how social capital has been critical in developing coping mechanisms for the survival of local people to confront security as well as social and economic challenges where state capacity was either diminished or absent. Local communities have relied on informal norms of cooperation that served useful in building trust across communities by encouraging collective action to resolve the exigencies of public life, including those that fall within the remit of the state, such as security and education.

Social capital, as defined by Robert Putnam, James Coleman and Francis Fukuyama, offers useful insights in understanding the link between state-building and social capital. A commonality in these authors' conception of social capital is that trust is epiphenomenal, as it facilitates informal norms of cooperation and reciprocity rather than constituting social capital by itself. Another main similarity in their definition of social capital is that it is situated in social structures in which cooperation between individuals or groups takes place. However, whilst Coleman (1998:105) conceives of social capital as a public good that therefore would be under-produced by private agents, Fukuyama (2001:10) refutes this claim by contending that cooperation is necessary to virtually all individuals as a means of achieving their selfish ends. As we shall see later in the South Sudan case study, these contrasting ideas are both useful as they enable us to understand that although social capital can produce positive externalities, it can also be mobilised for the narrow goals of a group. For instance, during periods of armed conflict, social capital is often hijacked and mobilised to form allegiances within the belligerent parties (Leff 2008).

Putnam (1993:36) focuses on horizontal relationships in society by conceiving of social capital as consisting of 'features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'. Drawing from his study on Italy's governmental reforms, Putnam noted that communities with positive economic development and effective governments are those supported by networks of civil engagement, which foster norms of reciprocity that reinforce sentiments of trust within a society.

Putnam (2000) further elaborates his conception of social capital by stating that social networks can be between homogenous groups, that is *bonding*, or between heterogeneous groups, hence conceived as *bridging* social capital. Both bonding and bridging social capital are important for social and economic development and for group survival, due to their potency in developing coping mechanisms in times of socio-economic difficulties.

Fukuyama cautions that *bonding* social capital is amenable to supporting vertical patronage systems where social capital can be used to cultivate patron-client relationships (Fukuyama 2002) that are inimical to state-building. In his conception of social capital, Fukuyama contends for a 'wider radius of trust' embedded in networks that transcend a particular group (such as one based on kinship ties) in order to have a vibrant civil society which is an important ingredient for democracy (Fukuyama 2000). Trust, in his view, is a key measure of social capital and is reproduced through norms of reciprocity and successful cooperation in networks of civic engagement (Fukuyama 2001). Coleman's definition of social capital focuses on vertical relationships that are characterised by hierarchy and an unequal distribution of power among members (Coleman 1988), echoing Fukuyama's conception that social capital can be beneficial to some and/or harmful to others, depending on its characteristics and application.

Both formal vertical relationships and informal horizontal forms of social capital which generate trust embedded in structural relationships are critical in political settlement, which is at the heart of state-building. However, it is important to note that most of the time there is a paucity of generalised trust in formal [vertical] institutions due to the state's failure to meet the demands of its people. Consequently, the tendency to develop coping mechanisms for the realisation of social and economic needs tends to be more undergirded by informal horizontal relationships between people, which over time derive a sense of legitimacy. Boege et al (2008:7) note that, '... on many occasions, therefore, the only way to make state institutions work is through utilising informal and other traditional networks. This way, the state's 'outposts' are mediated by 'informal' indigenous societal institutions which follow their own logic and rules within the (incomplete)

state structures'. This results in the coexistence of various sources and forms of legitimacy, and these may not necessarily reinforce each other, but rather compete with or undermine one another (Menocal and Fritz 2007).

The foregoing shows that laying emphasis on formal institutional choices alone is bound to produce unintended outcomes to state-building. This may include a decay of the monopoly of the state's legitimate use of coercive force, leading to the unregulated use of force by other actors within the state. One of the challenges in South Sudan is the pursuit of formal institutional development to the detriment of informal institutions in a bid to build a state that satisfies the needs of the society while remaining resilient to conflicts. The December 2013 conflict was therefore a corollary of this state-building approach in South Sudan.

### **Emergence of the State of South Sudan**

South Sudan is the product of a painful history of struggles for self-determination characterised by protracted wars while it was still territorially an integral part of Sudan. The first civil war in Sudan that started at independence from Britain in 1956 pitted Anya-Anyas rebels in southern Sudan, who were mostly African Christian and animist, against the Islamic and Arab-dominated, Khartoum-based GoS. The civil war ended in 1972 with the Addis Ababa Agreement which granted the south of Sudan political autonomy with a regional executive and legislature. The Agreement only lasted until 1983 when President Ja'afar Nimeiri abrogated the agreement and continued the policies of Arabisation and Islamisation of the South (Lesch 2001:14). The discovery of oil, which is mostly located in the south of Sudan, was a key factor in making the civil war intractable as it became the economic mainstay of the country and a source of self-aggrandisement of the Northern political elite. The CPA which ended the second civil war created a semi-autonomous territory of Southern Sudan with its own government, although the GoS maintained overall jurisdiction over the national territory. The CPA also stipulated a six-year transitional period after which the people of Southern Sudan would be given an opportunity to choose through a referendum whether to

unite with or secede from the Sudan. The overwhelming vote for secession in January 2011 led to the independence and creation of the Republic of South Sudan on 9 July 2011, six months later.

The people of South Sudan were subjected to a long history of imposed racialised and religious identity constructs that predates the colonial era. These were sustained during colonialism and mobilised by successive post-independence Northern governments of the Sudan and consequently underpinned the political, economic and social marginalisation of southerners (Deng 1995). Although the leader of SPLM/A, the late John Garang, originally had a vision of a united 'democratic' Sudan, it was more than obvious that the currents would flow undeterred towards a total political disengagement from the North. The 98.83% vote for self-determination (Southern Sudan Referendum Commission 2011) was a polemical expression of the aspirations of southerners.

That said, it is important to note that the very racialised identities of the North-South axis in Sudan that were politically constructed to produce historical forms of power (Idris 2001) have now transmuted and reproduced themselves in the independent South Sudan as constructs of ethnic supremacy tied to post-independence entitlements. Whilst the Dinka and Nuer-dominated SPLA led the struggle against the North, the two ethnic groups split in 1991 into rival factions under John Garang (Dinka) and Riek Machar (Nuer) respectively during the civil war. The internal conflict between the Dinka and Nuer elites was mainly influenced by the quest for political-military leadership of the southern course (Madut and Hutchinson 1999:127–128). This was also underpinned by competition for economic resources which resulted in the violence being directed against each other's civilian population (Madut and Hutchinson 1999:128).

Hitherto, the Dinka-Nuer dominance had carried a different ideological construction from the kind of dominance sought during the CPA transitional period and after secession. During the civil war, the two ethnic groups, which are the most populous in South Sudan, had not attained the objective of transforming their relationship with the North in order to lay

claims for legitimating their dominance over southerners. Therefore, it was difficult to mobilise and sustain an ideology of ethnic supremacy and seek entitlements through use of state power. As Schomerus and Allen (2010: 20–21) state, ‘political power is an extremely scarce and highly valuable resource, available only periodically under specific conditions. In Southern Sudan, the CPA Interim Period<sup>2</sup> provided those conditions’.

The logic of indigenous, inferior southern identity which was formed by the North undergirded entitlements that excluded most southerners from governance. As we shall see below, this logic has now been reproduced by the southerners themselves through the agency of state-building. The CPA Interim Period as well as the secession offered beneficial conditions for the Dinka and Nuer to define a form of political settlement which justified their grip on political power and determined the accompanying socio-economic entitlements. The state-building process that favoured formal institutional development sustained this mode of settlement.

### **The December 2013 conflict: A reminder of the hard road to state-building**

The conflict which started on the evening of Sunday 15 December 2013 in South Sudan claimed thousands of lives and left over 1 500 000 people displaced. The violence began when the SPLM National Liberation Council was holding its meeting in Juba, the capital of South Sudan. Riek Machar, the leader of SPLM/A-IO, was sacked as Vice-President by President Salva Kiir in July 2013 in a cabinet purge. This purge was aimed at political rivals within the Government, thereby reviving the past violent factionalism that was evident during the North-South civil war (Fletcher 2013).

According to a report by the International Crisis Group (ICG 2014), the dispute within the SPLM that led to the conflict was primarily political. President Kiir declared an attempted coup d'état, a claim refuted by Machar, the SPLM-IO leader. However, communal mobilisation along ethnic lines led to appalling levels of brutality against civilians, including

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2 This refers to the CPA six-year transitional period.

deliberate killings inside churches and hospitals. Whilst violence initially targeted Dinka and Nuer civilians, armed youth from different ethnic groups mobilised and responded to attacks in a widening circle of reprisal and revenge (ICG 2014:9). It is important to understand how the conflict found the intensity to spread rapidly in a matter of days to civilian spheres. The violence found a fertile seedbed of volatile space of weak social capital ready to be exploited by the political elite.

At independence on 9 July 2011 the new citizenry was plunged into a difficult road of state-building where everything was either a 'need or necessity' (Gerenge 2014:24). Basic infrastructure to deliver essential public services in South Sudan was minimal at best, compared to most African states at independence in the past century. This condition is well captured by the South Sudan Fragility Assessment Report (GoSS 2012:1) which states that:

Due to the legacy of conflict and neglect, socio-economic development in South Sudan starts from a very low base, despite a nominally high income derived from oil. In the absence of basic infrastructure and limited delivery capacity, most people remain cut off from access to social services. Many health, education and food security indicators remain close to crisis levels. Government capacity to deliver services only begins to form, and is limited by fiscal austerity following a temporary shutdown of oil production.

Thus, the December conflict unfolded on the back of persistent social and economic demands and war fatigue. The post-secession euphoria in South Sudan dissipated fast in the face of persisting social and economic challenges accentuated by growing insecurity that ran deep within South Sudan (Stevenson 2011). Indeed, war-like tendencies had already begun to re-emerge in the face of challenging social and economic conditions in the transitional period. Laudati (2011:20–23) gives a nuanced and empirically-informed insight on the extent to which in Jonglei, the largest and most populous of South Sudan's ten states, the Dinkas have obscured the ethnic supremacy construct through the formation of a victim narrative over the more widely cited liberator narrative, which legitimises greater Dinka control over non-Dinka regions. It is alleged that Dinka portray themselves

as peace-loving and the victims of aggression from other communities whom they label as aggressive. This construct is sustained by the Dinka diaspora with greater access to the media and as well as the government machinery. It is alleged that the Dinka diaspora have tended to gloss over evidence of Dinka-perpetrated atrocities against other communities. Yet, as of October 2012, Jonglei accounted for 74 per cent of 1 326 conflict-related deaths during the year (GoSS 2012:3).

It is worth noting that a similarly disguised victim-liberator narrative has also been crafted by the Nuer and played a significant role of mobilisation of Nuer civilians in internally displaced camps as a result of the December conflict. The displacement of Nuer populations led to mobilisation of the Nuer White Army as a response to the perception that President Kiir is consolidating a 'Dinka dominated' Government (South Sudan Protection Cluster 2014).

That said, the reality is that the current state-building approach which builds on institutions that existed during the CPA transitional period, in fact, propagates the liberator narratives of both Dinka and Nuer. On one hand, this approach nominally emphasises a democratic track focused on seeking to build strong decentralised state institutions that seek to redress the legacy of marginalisation by the North (Schomerus and Allen 2010). However, on the other hand, this approach has produced counter-productive results. The decentralised institutions lack accountability at the local level and have served to create tribal fiefdoms, which become incubators of violence themselves (Schomerus and Allen 2010). On the back of high levels of poverty, merit-based recruitment in the public administration in South Sudan has been superseded by nepotism based on the grounds of those who fought for peace most (African Development Bank 2011) – a claim that is palatable to the Dinka and Nuer but inimical to the democratic track of state-building that promotes inclusive governance. This system uses government salaries for little or no work performed, which further drains government resources that otherwise might be used for public service delivery (African Development Bank 2011:22).

The formal institutions of the state meant to distribute public goods and services to the people have been captured and have become detrimental to the informal norms of cooperation by sowing discord among communities. The result of state capture in South Sudan is that ‘the underlying ethnic and regional cleavages continue to provide a motive for violence. The actors who mobilise these grievances and have the organisational, financial and other capacities to organise and direct violence (the means); and trigger points that provide the opportunity for conflict actors to set violence into motion’ (African Development Bank 2011:21).

The Dinka-Nuer ethnicised liberator narrative has therefore served to strengthen *bonding* social capital<sup>3</sup> but depleted the *bridging* social capital among communities. This has resulted in creating weak structural relationships in society which impede the generation of cooperative norms by cultivating a wider radius of trust beyond a particular ethnic group. The December 2013 violent conflict was, thus, poised to rapidly escalate through mobilisation along the existing structural fault-lines despite the fall-out between President Kiir and former Vice-President Machar a few months earlier.

### **Quest for ‘peace’ or post-secession dividends**

The politics of patronage has to be understood within the extant tensions in South Sudanese society which are a result of the clamour for peace or post-secession dividends. The quest for dividends has reproduced conflicting visions of the kind of political settlement that should be forged in South Sudan. The local Dinka and Nuer people are perceived to have relatively easier access to public goods through their patrons in the government or within the SPLA, whilst the rest of society have simpler expectations of a fair share from the state. For instance, Pinaud (2014:208) provides an example of how patronage has been built on kinship networks in state institutions in South Sudan. She notes that the military elite dominated by Dinka and Nuer, for

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3 This does not mean that there are no intra-Dinka and Nuer divisions. In fact, there are members of these communities who disagree with the constructed supremacy of these tribes (see ICG 2014).

instance, used the affirmative action criteria of the post-CPA constitution, which states that at least 25 percent of the organisation must be female, to appoint the wives of commanders and of lower-stratum intermediaries to important army, police, and government positions. De Waal (2014) argues that the GoSS allowed this kind of patronage to exist in order to maintain cohesion within the SPLM/A. As in other post-conflict settings, ensuring cohesion in the army through maintaining loyalty is crucial, particularly, because the national army is often composed of former armed rebel groups who undergo a process of transformation through disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration. However, the process of deconstructing previous loyalties to former rebel leaders is complex and often replete with unintended consequences. Indeed, the effort to maintain loyalty of the army through patronage in South Sudan has proven counter-productive, as clearly shown by the eruption of the December conflict within the ranks of the SPLM/A and also within a volatile civilian space.

It is known that the Dinka and Nuer played a prominent role during the civil war against the North, but ordinary citizens in South Sudan also lay rightful claims that they participated in and were affected by the liberation war and have an inalienable entitlement to the post-civil war dividends (South Sudan News Agency 2014). In a country with over sixty ethnic groups, many non-Dinka and non-Nuer civilians lament that they also lost their property and members of their families during the civil war with the North, and therefore are rightfully entitled to a fair share of government jobs and security (South Sudan News Agency 2014).

Whilst the above shared historical experience should guide the population towards common aspirations, post-CPA realities show how ethnic supremacy has redefined social order in local communities. An illustrative example of the detrimental quest for entitlement is vividly illuminated by a leader of a local non-governmental organisation in Western Bahr eh Ghazal, South Sudan who commented in 2010 that:

You know, our Dinka, during the war, there was nothing. After CPA, they start fighting. I went to Mundri, there was a big farm. And Dinka of Bor

took their cattle there. They ate everything. But the payam<sup>4</sup> administrator said we have no choice. Dinka says it belongs to them and they have a gun. I went to Torit and I heard that there is now a payam in Nimule called Bor [Dinka town and Garang's home] payam... For me I am thinking that they are thinking this Southern Sudan belongs to them. So they want to cover all the small tribes (Schomerus and Allen 2010:20).

The above predicament is a manifestation of communities at odds with each other, where informal norms of cooperation are either minimal or non-existent and public institutions are incapable of regulating relationships among citizens. It has constrained the generation of *bridging* social capital across ethnic groups and communities in South Sudan, which is a consequence of the state-building process in South Sudan.

The depletion of social capital can be understood by looking at how cooperative informal norms among communities prevailed before periods of violent inter-communal conflicts. According to Deng (2010:242), farming was a collective endeavour in communities in South Sudan. This traditional practice involves a regular system, whereby each household within the community invites members of the community to perform a certain activity on its farm; in return, the inviting household will provide food and local beer.

Despite intermittent conflicts that existed during the CPA six-year transitional period, the massive rallying for secession (with a 98.83% vote) indicates that there was still a dense stock of social capital that could be explored and nurtured by defining a common vision of political settlement. Whilst there is no accepted method of measuring social capital, the level of internal group cohesiveness and action in relation to outsiders can be a critical qualitative measurement of social capital (Fukuyama 2001:13). The overwhelming vote by the southerners to secede from the North therefore indicated the level of spontaneous cohesion where the people acted in collective resolve towards a common goal. It is this instantiated informal

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4 *Payam* is the nomenclature of the local administrative unit in South Sudan.

norm that promoted the cooperation towards secession that was further depleted rather than nurtured by the state-building process in South Sudan.

### **Social capital: A recourse for peace in South Sudan**

As noted earlier, alongside the main conflict pitting the GoS against the SPLM-IO, other localised violent conflicts also persisted in communities. The grievances tend to be related to resource competition as well as perceptions of economic and political marginalisation. It has also been noted that current state-building challenges facing South Sudan have led to the further breakdown of state capacity to respond to citizens' needs while citizens' expectations of the state remain high. Under these circumstances, the quest for a state that is responsive to the needs of the people as an entitlement for the hard-won independence of South Sudan is likely to continue to strain the already weak institutions.

Whilst the peace accord to end the December 2013 conflict has been signed, sustainable peace through the current state-building trajectory cannot be realised through formal institutional engineering alone. Indeed, there is already a realisation in the state-building and conflict management literature that there are 'limits of constitutional engineering alone' in achieving sustainable peace after conflict (Wolff 2011). As stipulated in the peace accord, institutional arrangements that promote consociational governance have importance in promoting inclusive governance in divided countries (Wolff 2011), and would therefore, arguably, be instrumental in contributing to minimising the Dinka and Nuer hegemony in governance in South Sudan. However, more is needed in the state-building process than inclusive governance, whether through power-sharing or another form of institutional arrangement that ensures the different segments of society are genuinely represented in political institutions. That said, one of the main challenges encountered in fragile states is that this type of legitimacy can be particularly difficult to achieve, given these states' weak governance structures, which makes it difficult for them to build their legitimacy solely on the basis of their performance (Menocal and Fritz 2007).

That is, the re-negotiation of the relationship between the state and society in South Sudan must take cognisance of the logic that defines the current existing mode of political settlement – which is tied to the claims for dividends of peace or post-secession. For the state to grow its capacity in order to penetrate social life (Mann 1984), the people's expectations of the state must be transformed in South Sudan. Put differently, there is need for a gradual scaling down of expectations that the state of South Sudan is capable of meeting all demands, particularly social and economic. This does not imply the state 'exiting' society, but the state transforming its ideological technique by reshaping its relationship with the society.

Generally, in the face of the significant social, economic and political problems in the country the effects of state-building in South Sudan will not be easily palpable in the short or medium-term. This is in spite of the massive exogenous political, military and humanitarian support mobilised mainly through the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and other international initiatives. Indeed, experience has shown that external intervention alone cannot provide lasting solutions to security and governance dilemmas within a society (Sawyer 2005).

On the back of persistent social and economic needs in South Sudan, little investment has been directed at generating informal norms of cooperation among communities. The generation of such norms of cooperation can be achieved through developing public policies that encourage the formation of informal voluntary associational groups that specifically target collective actions for social and economic gains. Given that most of the conflicts are tied to the competition for post-secession dividends, understanding the potential sources of social capital in the South Sudanese society offers insights for building the self-governing capabilities of communities in South Sudan. Understanding how people craft or adapt institutions of collective action can serve as a critical lens for developing their capacities for self-governance, which can be extended to embrace situations of governance failure and violent conflict where survival is at stake (Sawyer 2005).

If the conflict in South Sudan is all about the politics of marginalisation, as viewed by some, then a critique of this view would be that conflict resulting from exclusion, inequality, and indignity does not in itself necessarily lead to the eruption of widespread hostilities (Colletta and Cullen 2000). Indeed, the tolerance and coping capacities of the poor and marginalised are legend and manifold (Colletta and Cullen 2000). Social capital has been instrumental in mobilising communities to cope with their own social, security and economic dilemmas in many contexts. In effect, social capital has contributed to the reformation of state-society relationships and management of conflicts.

Generally, it is important to note that states do not have many obvious levers for generating social capital (Fukuyama 2000). Social capital is frequently a by-product of religion, tradition, shared historical experience, and other factors that lie outside the control of government (Fukuyama 2001). Indeed, experience from countries such as Uganda suggests that a better understanding of how the synergy between social capital and public policy can be strengthened is crucial to minimise conflicts over scarce natural resources (Sanginga et al. 2007). In the South-western highlands of Uganda, a combination of voluntary associations ranging from credit and savings groups, farming groups, to church-based groups, and the development of by-laws, collectively contributed to managing conflicts (Sanginga et al. 2007). Since a considerable proportion of members of a particular social group belonged to several other self-help groups, the cost of making transactions was reduced as trust was built among the people and it became easier for parties to a conflict to resolve it through a win-win outcome (Sanginga et al. 2007). From this experience it can be deduced that multiple memberships which transcended 'tribal' borders created a dense network of shared interests among individuals, which in effect generated informal norms of cooperation based on embedded trust.

Stemming from the above, it can be noted that social capital has the capacity to restructure relationships to transcend specific groups (ethnic, religious or otherwise), trigger cooperative predispositions of individuals and engender peaceful resolution of conflicts when they

arise. All these cooperative engagements in Uganda were made possible through local policies that encouraged the formation of informal groups. For example, Sanginga et al. (2007) state that in order to buttress the structured resolution of conflicts through informal group networks, the local government developed by-laws that facilitated recourse to Local Councils by individuals in cases where there were overlapping conflicts that therefore perceivably required external adjudication. They also state that the success of this synergy between social capital and public policy is premised on complementarity and embeddedness: mutually supportive relations between local government and local communities, and the nature and extent of the ties connecting people, communities and public institutions. The Ugandan case above does not demonstrate state failure but rather limited state capacity to regulate conflicts, a situation remedied through recourse to social capital.

However, a different experience, in Liberia during the civil war, demonstrates social capital as being useful for the survival of individuals in situations of total governance failure, and demonstrates how it further forms an important building block in the reconstruction of post-conflict governance arrangements. According to Sawyer (2005), communities forged cooperative engagements with each other as a 'coping' mechanism against state-sponsored violence. Consequently, in the ensuing post-conflict reconstruction period, these already forged informal structural relationships among communities became critical in the mobilisation of joint efforts for local development such as building schools.

The resilience to conflicts in society undergirded by social capital is therefore structurally situated in a dense network of overlapping memberships that create broad trust that transcends specific 'group borders'. These dense informal norms of cooperation and reciprocity reproduced through pursuit of collective goals may be important in transforming the volatility of the public space that is easily exploited to mobilise the society through violence. In South Sudan, this volatility of the public space can be diffused by diminishing the over-reliance on the already strained state as the 'only'

means of realising social and economic ends and in effect helping to meet high expectations for 'peace' or post-secession dividends.

Thus, it is necessary to revisit the existing strategy for state-building in South Sudan. Whilst the current process of 'institutional engineering' needs to be sustained to ensure stronger accountability mechanisms that reduce patronage in governance, the ideological deconstruction of an approach that is hinged on ethnic supremacy tied to independence dividends is crucial to redefine the mode of political settlement for the state. Arguably, these efforts are only sustainable if other 'informal institutional arrangements' are nurtured to offer complementarity rather than supplant the legitimacy of the state to monopolise the use of force within its territory. Thus, conscious efforts to generate stocks of social capital as a self-regulatory governance system of conflict management among and across communities are suggested to buttress broader state-building mechanisms and secure sustainable peace in South Sudan.

## **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that the December 2013 conflict is not only about the elitist struggle for power between President Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, the former Vice-President, both representing the Dinka-Nuer ethnic axis of the conflict respectively. It is important to transcend this ethnic conundrum by seeking to understand how the conflict found so volatile a seedbed in the public space, propelling it to rapidly escalate to unimaginable scale in the civilian community. The triggers of the December 2013 conflict in South Sudan were indeed bound to benefit from such a volatile space. The conflict found a ground defined by weak *bridging* social capital that was depleted through a state-building process that favoured formal institutional engineering to the detriment of informal norms of cooperation based on horizontal relationships. The logic of racial and religious superiority which undergirded the civil war against the North has been reproduced within the new state of South Sudan. Whilst the southerners were conceived as inferior, those who were at the forefront in the liberation struggle have developed the same kind of supremacy

narrative that they resented while at war with the North. The post-CPA era offered beneficial conditions for the Dinka and Nuer to define a form of political dominance and accompanying socio-economic entitlements. Yet, on the other hand, ordinary South Sudanese citizens lay rightful claims to peace or post-secession dividends, which collectively has placed a high demand on the weak state. The divergent conception of expectations of the state has generated a conflicting vision of the state-society relationship in South Sudan.

By attempting to construct a nexus between state-building and social capital, this article has demonstrated that the success of state-building does not depend on formal institutional engineering alone but requires the buttressing of informal institutions as well. It is suggested that in order to renegotiate the relationship between the state and society, social capital should be incorporated for the peaceful management of conflicts by the state, which is under stress to deliver dividends for independence. In order to enhance the sustainability of the state, it is suggested that the current state-building strategy be revisited to integrate the fostering of social capital in order to contribute to the ‘development of self-governing capabilities’ of communities in South Sudan. This serves to buttress rather than supplant the state’s capacity to regulate conflicts.

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