

# Conflict Entrepreneurs in Prolonged Civil War in South Sudan

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## ABSTRACT

South Sudan has travelled a long and difficult journey in its quest to seek lasting peace which has been jeopardized by multifaceted factors and a multiplicity of actors including state and non-state operatives. Such determinants of internal peace processes, which have stood along the way, have been firmed up by deep and powerful players in this youngest state in Africa. Much clarity on what continues to transpire in South Sudan is grounded on scholarship which accounts for the roles of regional dimensions and international dynamics of conflict and peace processes in Sudan and South Sudan. Literature indicates that ethno nationalism, greed, grievance drivers, the Islamisation of politics when the south was part of the north, and the high-handedness of the Khartoum regime was central in the polarization of the state. We also examine the effect of natural resources particularly oil and militia factions in protracted conflicts in South Sudan. When South Sudan seceded in 2011, the state started from a fluid beginning, with weak institutionalization and the problem of ethnicization of the government and its related agencies. Although the explanations grounded on the conventional understanding of ethnicization of politics and loyalty deficits towards authority are critical, the state as an entity is bound by other activities that it maintains with external agents such as trade entrepreneurs who partly invest and occupy a wide economic space and agendas of wealth creation which informs the regimes economic wellbeing. This subject is understudied especially considering the contemporary peace processes and conflict resolution in South Sudan. In this study, I seek to explain the significance of conflict entrepreneurs in the peace process in South Sudan. Conflict Entrepreneurs consist of diverse actors including entities with commercial interests, MNCs, political elites, and states who directly and indirectly are involved in plundering resources and economic opportunities in civil war-torn South Sudan. The question is: which actors can be regarded as conflict entrepreneurs in South Sudan's conflict context and why? Second, what roles do these entrepreneurs play in South Sudan's peace process? Using governmental reports, newspaper analysis, and secondary research, these questions are addressed throughout this paper.

**Key Words:** Entrepreneurs, Protracted Conflict, Militia, Powerful Interests, Regional Dimensions, International Dynamics

## INTRODUCTION

South Sudan became an independent state in 2011 after a twenty-two years-long civil war following the hostilities between the Khartoum regime in the North and Sudan's People Liberation Movement (SPLM) that controlled the Southern part of Sudan. In 2005, a comprehensive peace agreement (CPA) signed between the northern-led government and the leadership of the southern rebel group, the SPLM ended the civil war, opening up a transition period of seven years that gave the southerners a semi-autonomous government known as the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS), headquartered in Juba. A referendum held in 2011 then gave South Sudanese approval to move and secede into their own state, opening up a new chapter in the life of southerners and the Juba regime. However, only two years after the formation of the new state of South Sudan, a new war pitting President Salva Kiir and his deputy, vice president Riek Machar began in 2013 after a mutiny of soldiers pledging their loyalty to Machar fought the security

contingent of President Kiir in the state house in Juba, an action that called for an emergency curfew to be imposed in Juba to restore normalcy in the capital and state. This civil war then grew after it took an ethnic angle prolonging for seven years only ending after a negotiated peace agreement leading to the formation of the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) in 2020. But as Deng (2018) observes, mistrust among the political elites, skewed resource allocation, and negative ethnicity still place the young country in danger of getting at war with itself.

Over the years, the South Sudanese prolonged civil war was understood within the context of destructive competition over power, access to vital economic opportunities, corrupt practices of elite groups, predatory activities on natural resources, negative ethnicity, and violence ( e.g Johnson 2003, Grawert 2010, Katete 2010). The second civil war which ended with the signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was settled by concerted mediation efforts from the international community within the framework of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the IGAD friends' forum comprised of western envoys and those from Scandinavian countries. Understandably, these drivers are self-reinforcing in nature and get submerged in what many commentators refer to as opportunistic agendas by elite groups from within the state as well as emanating from outside the borders such as smuggling networks, predatory behaviours, and black market traders (e.g. Collier 1999). Before the secession, the North-South Sudan divide was widened by the activities of companies involved in the oil trade, more particularly the China National Petroleum Company (CNCP), which managed to gain in the conflict situation discriminately, a situation linked to the problem of oil curse (e.g. William and Le Billion 2017) and the effect of the Dutch disease (Brahmbhatt et al. 2010).

In political economy literature, this situation which is referred to as the capture of state resources has the potential of interfering with state infrastructure given the weakening of institutional regimes operating within the conflict environment (Enough Project, 2019). Ploch (2013), points out that state and society captured by informal economic activities arise from a kleptocratic system of government that developed in the initial years after the end of the civil war in 2005 and the transition period in the aftermath of the secession of South Sudan in 2011. It should be noted that government elites comprised largely of the former warlords and rebels that fought during the civil war between the Khartoum regime and the SPLM/A. As is usually the case in war economies, the proliferation of armed militias, the emergence of the “merchants of war” as highlighted in the work by Jok (2015) who are actors that benefited from the conflicts, as well as the smuggling of illegal arms undermine resolution of conflicts.

During the transition period that followed the formation of the new state and the installation of a new government in Juba, a network of allies that emerged positioned themselves in decision-making arenas and had a say on the distribution of positions in political and economic sectors and the wealth of the state. The former SPLM leaders reconciled to get bigger positions in the government and political offices in the new state, including incorporating militias who fought side by side with them elevating them as the official military of the state, yet such former militias had no professional training to take charge of command required in the ranks and files of the military, had no training and poor mastery of discipline needed in armed forces of a state. In fact, as Omeje (2018) opines, military leaders, dominated the decision-making processes concerning public spending and wielded power with impunity, similar to what is experienced in most rentier states characterized by dictatorship and instability, weak institutional structures, corruption, and misgovernance.

The above account is a narrative on the early forms of state capture by internal agents who are mainly interested in economic opportunities at the expense of state stability and conflict resolution in South Sudan. In the next sections, we see how business opportunities were started and sustained by the ‘conflict entrepreneurs’ who continued to benefit from the conditions of a weak state that is unable to fulfil the collective agendas of the population. Recent studies have observed that such a state is under the control of

spoilers of the peace who are engaged in the process referred to as ‘spoiling’ in the context of what Paul Collier (1999) in his work refers to as ‘doing well out of war’, which resonates well with the South Sudan peace process dilemma. Scholars have reasonably explored the role played by different local, regional, and international actors in derailing the peace process by examining how the problem of spoiling leads to constant stalling of talks since even parties in round table talks have hidden economic agendas which they wish to gain from before making concessions during peace talks (Steadman 1997, Katete 2012, Katete 2022). This paper argues that most of the studies on the South Sudan conflict fall short of establishing a link between economic motivations and the ‘spoiling’ of the peace process in South Sudan. Even fewer reviews have been done on the actors who are not directly ‘spoiling’ the peace process but take advantage of the unending peace processes and lack of governance structures in the conflict theatres; either by themselves or in concert with the ‘spoilers’, participate and abet in the looting, safe custody, and transfer of the state resources overseas (Reno 2012).

## THE CONCEPT OF CONFLICT ENTREPRENEURSHIP

What does the concept of conflict entrepreneur mean and how significant is it in the study of the peace process and conflict resolution? Espen Barth Eide, in his 1994 UN report on Peaceful Resolution of Situations Involving Minorities used the term conflict entrepreneurs to explain the way contemporary civil wars start, linking this start-up of civil war to the roles that agencies play in instigating the wars. In this report, Eide (1994) describes the nature and types of contemporary and modern wars by pointing out that predominantly such wars take place between groups inside the state other than between states. Two typologies of such wars are eminent – those that seek to change the government to replace it with a new one using force, namely civil wars, and those that aim at seceding into a new state through the process leading to self-determination of secession as experienced for the case of South Sudan and Eritrea in contemporary Africa. These wars, accordingly, are started by disgruntled groups bound by the narrative of ethnic nationalism and who use political rhetoric citing economic marginalization as the central cause of their grievances (Katete 2022). The author argues that these wars are not expressions of ‘ancient hatred’ as they are often presented by many scholars, rather deliberate, manipulative activities conducted by political actors for specific purposes”.

From this definition, it can be inferred that the ‘modern’ conflicts started to benefit certain actors within the social setup of the state or even beyond the state. These are the actors who exploit the anarchy and institutional breakdown caused by the conflict, to prey on the state resources for their economic wealth accumulation and or for the benefit of close social groups they identify themselves with. This can be witnessed in many extractive industries across the countries categorised as the global south which are caused and exacerbated by politicised and corrupt revenue allocation from natural resources based around ethnic, religious, or regional lines and where self-seeking hegemonic elites whose interests in rent-seeking and accumulation determine the policies, statutes and institutional practices of the state (Omeje, 2005, William Aled and Phillipe Le Billon 2017).

Identity becomes a crucial tool for the conflict entrepreneur not only to start the conflict but also to find a justification for escalating and sustaining it. In civil wars, the conflict entrepreneurs will always try to make the point that their actions are taken for the benefit of a particular group. Instigating a conflict is made to appear as a prerequisite for preserving and protecting that collective against external threats; attacks to defend. Whether the conflict entrepreneur intends to achieve personal gains or a collective gain from the war ‘will hardly influence the way the cause is presented (Eide 1994).

Closely related to Eide’s thesis is the argument by Lake and Rothchild (1996) that in a conflict environment, some actors can exaggerate the hostility of others and magnify the likelihood of the conflict. The authors introduce two related terms in the discourse on the instigation of civil wars, that, ‘ethnic activists’ and

‘political entrepreneurs. They define ethnic activists as those individuals with especially strong needs to identify with ethnic kin who often manipulate such desires to produce a process of social polarisation that is rapid, apparently spontaneous, and essentially unpredictable.’ (Lake & Rothchild 1996).

In the next section, I delve into explaining the types of conflict entrepreneurs in the context of the South Sudan peace process followed by their roles in attempts toward resolution of conflict in South Sudan.

## **TYOLOGIES OF CONFLICT ENTREPRENEURS IN SOUTH SUDAN**

### **Multinational Corporations**

Many multinational corporations are operating in South Sudan and have exploited the weaker and unstable government infrastructure taking advantage of the lack of proper structures of monitoring and accountability frameworks that a competent government should be composed of for the sake of upholding financial competence such as tax collection. Thus, several illegal transfers of millions of cash from the country take place due to accountability deficits. Literature on MNCs operating in conflict societies point out the complexity of MNCs who directly and indirectly fuel the conflicts by arming militias and government-allied groups or conducting business transactions with local political actors who are perpetrating violence, which is an experience in South Sudan. Sentry (2019) points out an example of such an international company as the Dar Petroleum Operations Limited which is part of a consortium co-owned by China and Malaysia and has operated in South Sudan since the country’s independence in 2011 and deals in gas and oil. When the conflict broke out in 2013, many armed groups were formed for different purposes. Insecurity around the oil exploration areas such as Upper Nile prompted the creation of such groups as the Padang Dinka White Army, the Community Police Force, and the Oil Protection Force among others. Atrocities Watch Africa (2020) pointed out that Dar Petroleum directly provided support to some of the militia groups and facilitated the misuse of funds that were allocated for public development by senior government officials within the ministry of petroleum and that Dar petroleum supplied several militia groups with fuel at the request of senior state officials of South Sudan.

Deng (2018) observes that “South Sudan’s minister for Petroleum and Mining, Stephen Dhieu ordered Dar petroleum to supply Abushok forces and the forces of William Adeng Just with fuel to facilitate their operations” These were militia groups that continued to perpetrate violence in the region. This example is only one of the many cases of Dar Petroleum’s involvement in aiding the activities of the violent militia groups in South Sudan (Deng, 2018). As Dar Petroleum supplied the armed fighters who continued to mete violence on civilians and frustrate the peace process by dishonouring the ceasefire agreements, Dar Petroleum continued to cut deals with senior government officials to divert funds meant for community development for their selfish gain. As reported by The Sentry, in March 2018, for example, an undisclosed amount of Nile pet funds had been used to provide supplies to the Padang militia and pay its leaders.

### **Commercial Banks**

South Sudan’s financial sector has experienced an exponential expansion in recent years. Many financial institutions have invested in the young economy and by November 2013 there were at least 28 licensed commercial banks in South Sudan, many of which are foreign. (Sentry, 2015). The IMF reports observe that commercial banks’ capital holding is estimated at 97% in the 2013-2014 financial years. With the drop in oil receipts in South Sudan, there has been a drastic reduction in the amount of hard currency available to the government, giving room for the illicit economy to expand. Actors involved in illicit trade diversified their operations into a few profitable sectors like the financial sector where the well-connected elites are found running parallel currency markets. As Sentry 2015 explains, ‘currency speculation has become one of the most lucrative illicit businesses available to well-connected individuals in the country

causing inflation and currency depreciation in the country. With the proliferation of commercial banks, many of which are foreign, it became much easier to service illicit financial transfers as the banks opened up the larger financial system outside South Sudan and the East Africa region. The East African Newspaper in its report in 2019 observed that Bulk cash transfers became available with faster and safer wire transfers that require minimum disclosures or paperwork. The easy accessibility of banking services and the ease at which the corrupt political and military elites in South Sudan can wire stolen money out of the country have been a cause of concern. A report by a Kenyan-based organization, the Institute of Economic Affairs stated that Nairobi and Kampala were now leading East Africa's illicit financial flow capitals having received or processed billions of dollars in stolen funds from South Sudan thereby fuelling inflation and indirectly accused of financing civil war in South Sudan (The East African, 2019). As a consequence of this complicity, human rights activists in Kenya's capital, Nairobi, took to the streets demanding an official crackdown on several commercial banks, including, the Kenya Commercial Bank, Equity Bank, Cooperative Bank, and Stanbic Banks. All these Kenyan banks have spread their branches in South Sudan after the country got its independence in 2011. The activists accused the banks of aiding and abetting the continuation of the conflict in South Sudan. But as Radio Tamazuj observed, the banks denied involvement in any activities that are related to conflict and civil war in South Sudan (Radio Tamazuj, 2018).

## STATE ACTORS

State actors mainly take the forms of military involvement and key political leaders known to be associated with the spread and escalation of civil war in South Sudan. Only five days after war broke out in South Sudan, Uganda militarily intervened justifying its move for several reasons. The Ugandan president argued that his country had been invited by the legitimate government of South Sudan to assist in returning the country to order. His other justification for sending his troops was to evacuate Ugandan citizens that were trapped in the mix of conflict in South Sudan and pointed out that the IGAD, a regional body bringing together the countries in the Horn of Africa had sanctioned the military intervention (Relief Web, 2014). But as Apuuli (2014) explains, the underlying reasons for Uganda's military intervention in South Sudan were economic in the sense that South Sudan is one of the largest Uganda markets in the region exporting coffee, shoes, steel, and even vehicles. Thousands of Ugandans have also taken residence in South Sudan attracted by the new opportunities enabled by a recovering economy. As the war escalated, the Ugandan troops overtly took sides and joined the SPLA wing of the government to fight the opposition faction led by Riek Machar. This complicated the mediation process. Deutsche Welle (2018) ran a commentary pointing out an accusation on Uganda for covertly supplying weapons originating from Europe, the US, and China to both the government and opposition sides in South Sudan's conflict. This happened against the UN Security Council's arms embargo imposed on South Sudan in July 2018. The Associated Press came up with findings that observed that the arms and ammunition purchased by Uganda from Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia were diverted to the South Sudanese military and their armed allies in Sudan. South Sudan acquired the Bulgarian weapons after asking Uganda to issue end-user certificates to make it appear as if the weapons from Bulgaria were for use by the Ugandan armed forces. This report has been supported by a lobby group based in London namely, the Conflict Armament Research (CAR). This group claims that Uganda was buying weapons from European countries and giving them to South Sudan, despite the existence of an arms embargo.

The All Africa (2019) report observed that the presence of Uganda's military in South Sudan also bolstered President Museveni's push and placement of conditions during mediation of peace in South Sudan where he reportedly directed that Rebecca Nyandeng, widow of former leader John Garang, be allocated one of the five slots of Vice Presidents of South Sudan. This was confirmed when she was made one of the vice presidents in the newly formed unity government (All Africa, 2019).

## **Role of conflict entrepreneurs in peace processes in South Sudan.**

As highlighted in section 3, diverse groups of conflict entrepreneurs had set bases in South Sudan where they accrued several benefits while attempts at the search for peace unfolded. It becomes evident that one thing remained constant throughout the peace process – some actors continued to operate while motivated by economic opportunities in hindsight, which then worked against the direction of progress toward the achievement of peace. We see how President Kiir and rebel leader Riek Machar were both not necessarily driven by national interest and to reach a consensus in order to build peace in their new nation-state. Koos & Gutschke (2014) point out that the case of South Sudan presents a classic example where conflict entrepreneurs not only instigated the war and fanned its flames, but continuously frustrated the peace processes while they continued to plunder the state resources. In an attempt to discourage these elements from derailing the peace process in South Sudan, international players including the US, European Union, and the United Nations imposed targeted sanctions on certain individuals and entities whose roles in frustrating the process were evident. In 2014, the EU imposed sanctions on two South Sudanese military leaders whom it accused of breaking ceasefire agreements. Rebel chief, General Peter Gadet, and the SPLA army commander Santino Deng were linked to atrocities and the violence that rocked the country during the ceasefire period. The sanctions barred both men from travelling to any country within the EU region and froze any assets owned by them in this region (BBC, 2014). Aljazeera (2019) and Xinhua (2019) observed that in December 2019, the US imposed sanctions on two senior government officials for their roles in obstructing reconciliation efforts and perpetuating the conflict for their enrichment. Kuol Manyang Juuk, minister for Defence and Veteran Affairs, and Elia Lomuro, minister for Cabinet affairs were indicted by the US Treasury for frustrating the peace process. Deputy Treasury Secretary Justin Muzinich announced that the US had designated the two cabinet officials in the government of South Sudan because of their roles in “inhibiting political unification, expanding the conflict, and profiting from South Sudan’s war economy.” (Aljazeera, 2019).

Further, the international media mentioned above reported that the US imposed sanctions on five South Sudanese intelligence officers for the murder of two human rights activists, Aggrey Idris and Samuel Dong Luak in 2017. The US Treasury linked the disappearance and killing of the two activists to Abud Stephen Thionkol, Malual Dhal Muorwel, Michael Kuajien, John Top Lam, and Angelo Kuot Garang. The UN panel of experts reported that the two activists were exiled in Kenya but were kidnapped by South Sudanese security forces, flown back to Juba, and executed on a farm owned by President Salva Kiir (Reuters, 2019). The South Sudanese however, denied any knowledge of the disappearance of the duo. In January 2020, the US slapped South Sudanese Vice President Taban Deng Gai with sanctions and accused him of arranging and directing the illegal killings of opposition politician Aggrey Idris and human rights lawyer Samuel Dong Luak in 2017 in an attempt to intimidate the opposition and solidify his position in the government. Gai, having served as a governor of the oil-rich region in South Sudan was a powerful figure in the country with a strong affiliation to President Kiir. In his statement, the US Secretary of State said that Gai acted on behalf of President Kiir to “divide and sow dust, extend the conflict in South Sudan, and impede the reconciliation and peace process.” (Reuters, 2020). These sanctions are implemented under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act that targets perpetrators of serious human rights abuses and corruption that will freeze any of Gai’s US assets and generally prohibit Americans from doing business with him.

Looking at it critically, these sanctions and enforcement actions directed at the conflict in South Sudan have mostly targeted the lower cadre of government officials and only a handful of top elites. This casts doubt on their efficiency to deter or disrupt the conflict. For example, General Peter Gadet, who is a military commander, spends nearly all his time within South Sudan where the sanctions have little impact. Generally, the scope of the sanction’s designations proved to be of minimal effect to change the calculations

of the warring parties

## CONCLUSIONS

Entrepreneurs' role in Peace and Conflict appears paradoxical as a number of writers have alluded to (e.g. Joseph et.al. 2020; Joseph et al. 2021). This particular study attests to this point while depicting a wide array of actors driven by profit-seeking agendas in conflict-prone South Sudan. Conflict Entrepreneurs consist of diverse groups of actors including entities with commercial interests such as banks, MNCs, political elites, and states who directly and indirectly are involved in the plunder of resources and economic opportunities in civil war-torn South Sudan. Neighbouring states such as Uganda and Kenya have not remained neutral in the peace process in South Sudan. The two neighbouring countries have been accused from various quarters of hosting some of the suspects of violence who have plundered resources from South Sudan in Nairobi and Kampala. Such suspects lavishly spend the loot heavily in comfort in these Eastern African capitals at the expense of South Sudanese who face hunger and misfortunes of war and an unpredictable future. Also Sudan, because of its close relationship with and interests in South Sudan is part of the states that contributed to the continuation of the civil war in South Sudan given that diplomatic relations between Sudan and South Sudan have not been good since issues regarding border security and disputes over oil fields continue to evoke bad blood and military confrontation. Accusations have also been made that Sudan had been known to hire and arm the South Sudan rebel groups to fight the government and support Salva Kiir to promote their interests there. When the civil war in South Sudan broke out and escalated, Sudan became one of the peace guarantors during the process of mediation and pushed for its interest at the same time whereby it had the leeway to deploy its security forces and capture the contested oilfields.

As we have seen in section 4, Uganda has been accused of its role in deploying troops in South Sudan during the early stages of the conflict in support of the government. This action contributed to President Kiir becoming unrelentingly stubborn and unwilling to negotiate, and Machar and his opposition outfit willing to fight even more. Uganda, on one side posed as a peace mediator helping its neighbour get out of the problem; on the other side it continued to supply the South Sudan government and even the rebel groups with military weapons from China and Europe against the EU and UN embargo. Other states like China, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Eritrea also have interests in several ways in South Sudan.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Multinational Corporations (MNCs) should stick to best practices and should 'do no harm' while operating in conflict zones of South Sudan. More precisely, they need to conform to Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR) to promote community interests by way of supporting welfare projects such as health, education, water projects, and environmental conservation.
2. The South Sudanese government should establish strong policies to enable the creation of Micro, Small, and Medium Sized enterprises (MSMEs) which can be run by the population of South Sudanese origin to facilitate their entrepreneurship skills and innovation. Development partners need to work closely with the government to finance the MSMEs for sustainable economic growth harnessed from this sector. Formalization of government institutions. Revenue collections through tax payments need to be well planned for and any loopholes for tax evasion tightened to enable the government generate revenue to meet its expenses.
3. Commercial banks that operate in South Sudan should support growth in South Sudan by extending low-interest loan rates to civil servants to enable this cadre of the workforce to improve their housing needs by accessing mortgages which can improve their immediate needs as they perform central roles of service delivery within the government circles. In addition, Commercial Banks can provide loan facilities to Agricultural communities to venture into an agribusiness for internal markets and exports as part of alternative generating activities. This is a venture that can absorb a large section of the

population especially found in rural areas.

4. Neighbouring governments to the South Sudan government like the Ugandan government, Kenyan government, and Ethiopian government need to establish strong bilateral trade agreements to elevate the Juba regime economically. Policies that advance cooperation to solidify regional relations and mutual investment opportunities need to be prioritized. In addition, Donor governments and the international community should engage in supporting capacity-building programmes for scaling civil servants' administrative skills to enable government employees competently discharge duties accordingly.

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