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Civil society and peace building in Sudan: A critical look

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Abstract

The role of civil society organizations in peace making and peace building is often valorized, especially in countries that witness protracted conflicts. The assumption underlying this valorization is that while conflicting parties sign peace deals, it is civil society organizations that undertake the implementation of such peace deals. A significant requirement for the success of civil society organizations in peace building is their inclusion in peace making in the first place. Such inclusion is indicative of the recognition accorded to civil society organizations and, conversely, their exclusion means that those who broker peace deals are not cognizant of the roles of these organizations. While civil society organizations may have negative roles or may even be party to conflicts, it is important to highlight the instances in which they are excluded from partaking in peace-making and peace-building engagements. The conceptualization of civil society is yet another challenge that bears on how these organizations contribute to peace making and building. Sudan represents a case that requires scrutiny. The peace process that culminated in signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 started in 2002. Peace negotiations spanned over almost three years, with a notable absence of civil society organizations. Peace talks were an exclusive affair between the Sudan Government and Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M). Civil

society organizations in Sudan had to deal with the peace agreement as a product of bilateral negotiations between the two signatories, but were keen to contribute to the success of the agreement. Different was the case of the Doha peace talks on Darfur where civil society organizations from Darfur were present during the peace negotiations that culminated in the Doha Peace agreement of 2009.

Taking the examples of Darfur civil society organizations, and two Khartoum-based ones, this research closely looks at the roles civil society organizations play in peace building, the modalities of playing such roles, and the challenges facing them. The research concludes that despite political repression, a deteriorating economy and active war in three parts of the country, civil society organizations in Sudan do contribute to peace making and peace building. There is also a need to embrace a broad conceptualization of civil society, although we must be aware of the potential for romanticizing what these entities can achieve. By adopting the broader concept of civil society, one that allows for the inclusion of diverse groups such as traditional leaders, faith-based organizations, women, youth, ethnically based associations, professional societies, trade unions, and student unions, we will be in a better position to understand the role of civil society in the peace-building process.

Introduction

The role of civil society organizations in peace making and peace building is contentious. There is often a valorized role for civil society in promoting peace, especially in countries where conflict is protracted. The assumption underlying this valorization is that while parties to conflicts sign peace deals, it is civil society organizations that assist in the implementation of peace deals on the ground, selling the process, so to speak. For civil society organizations to succeed in selling peace deals, they should be active parts of such deals. A maximalist versus minimalist perspective is at play when trying to identify the role of civil society in promoting peace (Murphy and Tubiana 2010). While a maximalist perspective advocates for full participation of civil society in peace negotiations, a minimalist approach calls for the role of civil society to be that of an observer around the negotiation table. These two perspectives emanate from the continuous debate about what is meant by civil society, and the tendency to emphasize the voluntarist nature of civil society. Needless to say that a significant requirement for the success of civil society organizations in peace building, following a maximalist perspective, is their inclusion in peace making in the first place. Such inclusion is indicative of the recognition accorded to civil society organizations and, conversely, excluding civil society organizations means that those who broker peace deals are not cognizant of the roles of these organizations. That civil society organizations are vital players in peace processes is an issue over which there is little or no disagreement. As argued by Murphy and Tubiana (2010, 17), “civil society as a player in the peace process can no longer be treated as an afterthought.”

Yet, the role of civil society, while vital, should not be romanticized. Civil society organizations may play negative roles or may even be party to conflicts, and it is necessary to highlight instances where they have been excluded from partaking in peace-making and peace-building engagements (Bereketeab 2009). Exclusion represents a major dilemma facing civil society organizations in conflict and post-conflict societies. Sudan represents a case that requires scrutiny. The peace process that culminated in signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 started in 2002. The peace negotiations took

almost three years, with a complete absence of civil society organizations. Peace talks were exclusively between the Sudan Government and Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M). Civil society organizations were again excluded from the Abuja peace process between the Sudan Government and the Darfur armed groups, and between the Sudan Government and the Eastern Front in Asmara in 2006. Civil society organizations in Sudan had to deal with the different peace agreements as an affair strictly between the government and the armed groups. Many civil society organizations (e.g., Sudanese Writers’ Union and Sudan Organization for Research and Development) were however keen to contribute to the success of the agreement.

While civil society organizations were not included in the peace-making process in Sudan, their participation in peace building was not always welcome either. In 2006, just one year after the signing of the CPA, a new law organizing the work of civil society organizations was passed by the parliament. The law restricts the work of civil society and requires that they obtain approval from the authorities for funds they receive (Assal 2011b), as well as renew their registration annually. In the years that followed the promulgation of this law, many civil society organizations and NGOs were expelled and their registration was revoked. As a result, in 2009, thirteen international organizations were expelled and three national voluntary organizations shut down (see below). In 2012, three civil society organizations (Alkhatim Adaln Centre for Enlightenment and Renaissance, Sudanese Studies Centre, and Bait al-Finon) were closed down based on the accusations that they received external funding and posed threats to national security. Apart from external disturbances, part of the conflict is internal to these organizations; weak administrative structures, mediocre staff, financial insecurity, and lack of clarity in what they ought to perform, are some of the problems facing civil society organizations (Abdel Ati 2006).

The research problem can thus be framed within the ongoing debate about the role of civil society in peace building outlined above. While much of the debate in the field argues for a positive role of civil society in peace building, empirically there are many challenges that obstruct the capabilities of civil society. Some of these challenges are related to the very nature of civil society in the African context

where ethnicity, politics and clientelistic relationships are all issues that are part of their daily functioning; hence, a Eurocentric approach or definition falls short of truly capturing the realities of civil society. These challenges are present in Sudan and as the examples in this paper show, the complexity of civil society organizations in contexts of protracted conflicts requires a creative look that overcomes conceptual straightjackets; of the sort that endeavor to provide an all-inclusive definition for civil society. Empirically, this paper addresses dilemmas facing civil society in Sudan, where peace making, peace building, political repression, deteriorating economy and active wars in three parts of the country all go hand-in-hand. What challenges, internal and external, are civil society organizations facing? How do they deal with them? What aspects of peace building are civil society organizations engaging in? Are the roles of civil society organizations in peace building in Sudan maximal or minimal?

Methodology and organization of the paper

The paper combines review work and empirical investigation. It first engages with the debates on civil society organizations and clarifies conceptual issues relating to the nature of these organizations. While the paper does not embark in extensive conceptual/theoretical mapping, it reviews literature on civil society particularly in relation to peace building. In this regard, the involvement of Darfur civil society organizations in the Doha peace process will be looked at, with the objective of explaining the complexity of these organizations and the context in which they operate. One goal is to situate the maximalist and minimalist perspectives within the Sudanese context. The paper then focuses on two civil society organizations: Sudanese Writers' Union (SWU) and Sudan Organization for Research and Development (SORD). A closer look at these two civil society organizations is meant to elicit answers to the questions raised earlier, and to situate their engagement within the debates and theoretical discussions about the role of civil society in peace building. In looking at these two organizations, the author employs the following tools: (1) review of the basic documents (constitutions) of these organizations; their governance systems, mode of

operations, projects related to peace building and any relevant material that contributes to fulfilling the objectives of the chapter; and (2) interviews of members of these organizations to fill gaps in secondary data and within their documents. Interviews were conducted in Khartoum during different periods in 2013 and 2014. Supplementary interviews were carried out during September-October of 2015. The selection of these two organizations is rather idiosyncratic but serves the purpose of contrasting their work with that of the Darfur civil society organizations. While the Darfur-based civil society participated in Doha peace talks during 2009 and 2010, neither SWU nor SORD had the opportunity to participate in any peace talks. By focusing on these organizations, the author does not claim to represent civil society in Sudan as a whole, but to reflect on the challenges facing civil society in Sudan as it strives to contribute to peace building in a country whose conflicts are protracted.

Theoretical framework

The concept of civil society is rather amorphous and analytically contentious. Beyond this amorphous nature, "there is a tendency that everything located outside the perimeters of the bureaucratized state and any social association is thrown into the all-embracing basket of civil society" (Bereketeab 2009, 35). Locating civil society organizations outside the state assumes they are opposed to it. This, in the African context, is not necessarily the case, even though the relationship of civil society to the state is paradoxical. Mamdani (1996, 15) puts it this way: "Although autonomous of the state, this life cannot be independent of it, for the guarantor of the autonomy of civil society can be none other than the state." Tvedt states that "the great majority of the most influential of these organizations were financed by states and work in accordance with regulations issued by individual states...." (2007, 29). Similarly, Assal (2011b, 81) argues that "the civil society-State opposition that appears in much of the definitions about non-State actors is not totally unsubstantiated as the situation in Kassala reveals. Yet, we should not fall into the myopia of completely stripping off the agency of the State since there must be a body that regulates the presence of the different groups that fall, for good or bad, under the umbrella of civil society."

Civil society and the state may not be directly linked, but at times the line between the two is blurred, as ethnic, political, religious and other cleavages overlap.

For some scholars (Chabal and Daloz 1999), civil society can evolve through the existence of what is seen as a “shared common space.” In this space, there exist the state, civil society, and the family—civil society being between state and family, which are seen as public and private spaces, respectively. In reality, however, these three spaces overlap, not least in contexts where political and ethnic cleavages cut across each other. The lack of these distinct spaces does not necessarily signify the absence of civil society. Chabal and Daloz (*ibid.*, 17) are skeptical about the existence of civil society in societies that are traditional and have tribal, religious and sectarian associations. They also claim that there should be separation between civil society and the state: “The notion of civil society would only apply if it could be shown that there was meaningful institutional separation between a well organized civil society and a relatively autonomous bureaucratic state.”

Part of the conceptual discussion is also the question relative to who should be included in the definition (Kasfir 1998). But generally scholars of civil society are open to accepting broad definitions and looking at civil society as encompassing formal and informal, modern and traditional, religious and secular, civic and ethnic associations (Kasfir 1998; Young 1994; Bereketeab 2009). Others (e.g., Assal 2011b, 73) conceptualize civil society organizations generally as “non-state actors.” NGOs, professional associations, trade unions and even opposition political parties are considered civil society. Within this broad categorization, civil society “entails associations, with or against government, that strive to achieve democracy, human rights, rule of law, poverty alleviation, socio-economic development, environmental and cultural preservation, conflict

resolution, peace and stability, community solidarity...” (Bereketeab 2009, 36).

The above list of activities in which civil society is engaged is by no means exhaustive, and by no means standardized for civil society everywhere. This is so because the emergence and development of civil society is predicated on the dynamics of certain societies. The presence and proliferation of civil society reflects the needs, political and social developments in the particular society. For instance, much of what civil society in Sudan has been engaged with for almost a decade is a product of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed in 2005 between the Sudan Government and SPLM, and the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) in 2006 between the Sudan Government and one of the Darfur armed groups. Indeed, hundreds of civil society organizations sprung up following the signing of the peace agreements.

A critical question that can be posed within theoretical and conceptual discussions on the subject is why civil society matters. Part of the answer to this question lies in the political theory that contests the domination of public life by the state. In this regard, Bratton (1994, 1) argues that “common elements in

the civil society discourse are a critique of state domination of public life, a preference for reform over revolution, and a strategy for political change based upon negotiations and elections.” The celebration of the role that civil society plays may indicate that conventional checks and balances between the three constituents of government (the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary) should be supplemented by civil society.

Bratton (1994, 1–2), unlike Chabal and Daloz (1999), argues that there is evidence of a nascent civil society in Africa and that universal ideas require adaptation to take into account distinctiveness of different world regions in terms of socioeconomic development and cultural attributes. Bratton

“The notion of civil society would only apply if it could be shown that there was meaningful institutional separation between a well organized civil society and a relatively autonomous bureaucratic state.”

Chabal and Daloz

provided a definition for civil society anchored on three aspects: “civil society is defined ... as a sphere of social interaction between the household and the state which is manifest in norms of community cooperation, structures of voluntary association, and networks of public communication.” For Bratton, the most important values for the construction of civil society are trust, reciprocity, tolerance, and inclusion. Furthermore, “the most common organizational structure in civil society is the voluntary association, a grouping of citizens who come together by reason of identity or interest to pursue a common objective” (1994, 1–2). Bratton contrasted the state with civil society in an interesting manner: “We can conceive of the state as the realm of the politics of force by which governing elites exercise their domination over society. By contrast, civil society is the realm of consent through which citizens may choose to accept or to reject the use of force by state officials” (ibid., 3). I find Bratton’s conceptualization useful in delineating many aspects that are otherwise blurry. For instance, there is often the debate on whether or not political parties should be considered part of civil society. As argued by Bereketeab (2009, 46–7), the boundary between political opposition and civil society has become blurred due to overlapping functions and objectives. While it is difficult to distinguish between civil society and political parties, it can be said that “while political opposition aims at capturing state power, civil society works for societal change without aspiring to ascend to state power.” In a similar fashion, Bratton (1994, 4) maintains that “whereas the civil society contains institutions like neighbourhood associations, professional bodies, and organized religions, political society refers to political parties, elections and legislatures...political society refers to the institutions through which social actors seek to win and exercise state power.”

The above discussion was meant to elicit current debates and conceptual issues surrounding civil society. It was also meant to provide guidance for the empirical analysis of civil society’s engagement in the peace process in Sudan. The broad definitions and conceptualizations discussed above serve to direct the subsequent analysis. Indeed, the Sudanese condition is marred with challenges that are at the heart of theoretical debates on civil society. A constellation of different groups—ethnic, religious, tribal, professional, and pseudo political—

fall under the rubric of a broadly conceptualized civil society in Sudan. Drawing on the acceptance and legitimacy these groupings gain from their constituencies, civil society in Sudan engages in a wide variety of peace-making/building activities; ranging from relief distribution to spreading peace culture, and advocating for democratic change. One aspect that must be emphasized is the necessity of looking at civil society within the context in which it exists. The engagement of civil society in Sudan in promoting peace is driven by local needs, although such engagement may also be in response to other factors that may not be internal to the country.

Civil society in Sudan: A short overview

The beginning of the modern civil society in Sudan goes back to the early years of the 20th century, represented by semi trade unions, religious groups, societies and educational groups that resisted the British colonial rule. One major body was the White Flag Society, which resisted the colonial regime, and is often seen as the seed of the modern, politically oriented civil society. The Graduates’ Congress developed during the 1930s and led the resistance until Sudan got its independence in 1956. The Graduates’ Congress is seen as the predecessor of the modern Sudanese political parties (Abdel Ati 2006). During the 1940s and 1950s, trade unions were strong and led the anti-colonial struggle. The Sudanese Women’s Union appeared in 1952 as one of the main civil society organizations of the time, and called for women’s education and equal pay.

Civil society organizations (mainly professional and student unions) were instrumental in toppling two dictatorships in Sudan: Aboud’s regime in October 1964, and Numeiri’s regime in April 1985. In 1985, professional urban-based trade unions and the Khartoum University Student Union led the uprising against Numeiri. The role of civil society in political change in Sudan, therefore, cannot be underestimated. Civil society in Sudan was vibrant during the 1980s and the sense of voluntarism embraced by Sudanese civil society was instrumental in confronting the 1984–85 famine that hit the country (Assal 2011a). Having a very clear take on what trade unions are capable of doing, the current regime dissolved political parties and all democratically elected and legitimate trade unions in 1989. The replacements

were pro-government trade unions whose members and key leaders were Islamists. Generally, since 1989 and beyond, “politically engaged civil society organizations like trade unions have increasingly been restricted by the state or supplanted by new welfare-based or issue-based organizations. These new organizations do not have the political role or power once held by trade unions and their capacity for influencing the Sudan peace process has been relatively weak” (Abdel Ati 2006, 68).

Part of the problem with civil society in Sudan is the heavy-handed regulatory system imposed by the government through its coordinating body, the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC). HAC’s work is supposed to be related to coordinating humanitarian interventions of national and international NGOs that provide emergency relief. However, HAC has been transformed into a security body that, instead of facilitating the work of civil society and overseeing emergency interventions, is actually hampering it through imposing restrictions on movements and interventions. Amnesty International thus reports “restrictions on the work of humanitarian agencies by government forces and armed opposition groups have narrowed the space in which humanitarian assistance can be provided in Darfur” (2007, 2). Civil society in Sudan is discouraged, and sometimes prohibited from engaging in political issues like human rights and governance. Even their engagement in service delivery is sometimes restricted. In 2009, the Sudan Government expelled 13 international NGOs and revoked the registration of three national NGOs.¹ According to Pantuliano et al.,

“many of the expelled agencies were also involved in food security and livelihood support programmes, for both camp-based and rural populations. These programmes ranged from vocational training, income generation and fuel-efficient stoves to agricultural and livestock support, including agricultural inputs, training in improved practices and veterinary care. Whilst small in scale compared to more mainstream humanitarian responses, such interventions are important in protracted crises, both to support the diversification of livelihood strategies and to utilise all possible means to meet basic needs.” (2009, 5)

In Sudan it is extremely difficult to draw a clear line between political parties and civil society. This is so because the government is instrumentalizing civil society for its own purposes. This is the case with the incumbent government that took power in a military coup in June 1989: “It formed unions with organs associated with the one-party system, and interfered directly in selecting the leadership of independent organizations ranging from sporting clubs to the Sudanese Red Crescent Committee” (Abdel Ati 2006, 69–70). Creating its own proxies, the government not only has shrunk the space for civil society, but also directed the work of its proxies towards an agenda that serves the interests of the government, not the people. An example of this is the Sudanese Workers’ Trade Union Federation (SWTUF), a body that supposedly works for realizing the rights of Sudanese workers. For many years, the SWTUF has been serving as a government organ—its leadership positions were all filled by members of the ruling party—with a lack of transparent elections. Its leadership is supportive of government policies even when such policies contravene the interests of its constituencies. The government, claiming to adopt an Islamic system of governance, is nervous about trade unions since they are thought to be communist products: “A conceptual aspect of Islamic thinkers and Islamists’ aversion to unions lies in their anti-communism, since they considered unions as politically and materialistically oriented instruments in the hands of Communists after the Second World War. They also perceived the unions as controlled by opportunistic and immoral leaders who supported the secular and nationalist states in the 1960s and 1970s” (Bilal 2005, 11). It is no wonder, then, that the Sudanese Presidential Assistant “has warned the Sudanese Workers’ Trade Unions Federation (SWTUF) against infiltration by what he called shadow unions and emergency committees, accusing the left-wing parties of exploiting labor issues for ‘narrow’ partisan interests.”² The Islamist orientation of the government implies that trade unions perceived to be antagonistic will be suppressed.

The decade of the 1990s was tough not only for civil society but also for the country at large. Sudan was under different regimes of economic and political sanctions, deteriorating economy and international isolation. The ban on political parties and independent civil society imposed in 1989 continued and although

there was a conspicuous presence of international NGOs, Sudanese civil society was hardly visible. However, with the start of the peace process in 2002, civil society became visible. In addition to the peace process, the possibility of receiving money from donors also contributed to the increase in the number of civil society organizations in the country. The increase in the number of civil society organizations is therefore a response to national challenges (peace process) and international opportunities and ethos (funding opportunities and new issues such as civic education, participation and peace building). From a political perspective, civil society in Sudan can be seen as filling the gap due to the absence of vibrant political parties. Disillusioned by weak political parties, educated activists turn to civil society to promote and build peace in Sudan (Assal 2011a).

One aspect that needs to be stressed is that leaders in most Sudanese civil society organizations were and continue to be led by those who were sacked by the government during the 1990s. They used the knowledge and expertise gained during their work in public institutions as they transitioned into new positions, and despite their efforts towards independence, “political polarization between the government and opposition groups made it impossible for civil society to be independent. Most of these organizations suffer from government repression and donors’ agenda and conditions. But still there are some independent ones.”³ The absence of national philanthropy capable of providing funding for civil society makes it almost impossible for civil society organizations to be independent. Efforts of the main political parties “to create their own civil society organizations failed because these parties have problems of their own...due to shrinking state responsibilities and weak civil society, tribal and regional entities were revitalized; to play the role of conflict resolution. I believe the participation of civil society in negotiations is not possible because negotiations are governed by and subject to power balances.”⁴

The influence of Sudanese civil society in the peace process that led to the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 was minimal. The process was an affair between the Sudan Government and Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM). Neither the two negotiating parties nor the mediators (IGAD, Norway, the United States and the United Kingdom) were keen on the inclusion of civil society, maximally or minimally. In response to the lack of inclusion, some Sudanese civil society organizations met in the United Kingdom in 2003 and stated the following: “We emphasize that no one group or groups can face such challenges alone; without including others. In this regard, we would like to add that civil society organizations play a vital role in the peace process since it represents a broad rainbow of Sudanese social fabric, and therefore the participation of these civil society organizations ... represents a vital element for any comprehensive and successful political settlement.”⁵

The groups made a clear call for the need to include civil society in the peace process between the Sudan Government and the SPLM: “While we support the IGAD peace process and welcome the Machakos Framework Agreement of 20 July 2002, we strongly demand the immediate participation of the civil society as a guarantee for a lasting and comprehensive solution for the Sudan problem. We

believe that any bilateral agreement between the Sudan Government and the SPLM will neither represent the Sudanese people, nor lead to a lasting settlement.”⁶ In November 2015, just one month after the start of the National Dialogue,⁷ the Confederation of Sudanese Civil Society Organizations (CCSO)

“Dialogue should begin at the community level such that it is bottom-up.”

Confederation of Sudanese Civil Society Organizations (CCSO)

issued a statement that civil society should lead the dialogue at local and regional levels: “Dialogue should begin at the community level such that it is bottom-up. As CSOs and CBOs are an integral part of society, they could play a leading role in the dialogue...” Moreover, CCSO is calling for a direct participation in the national dialogue, “along specific guidelines that govern the participation of delegates, and reduce

the possibility of personal inclinations and positions during deliberations. Civil society would participate in all sessions/deliberations of the dialogue... and monitoring and reporting of the outcomes of a national dialogue.” This position shows that civil society in Sudan insists on having a maximal role in peace building: participating at all levels including negotiations and implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Unfortunately, as examples show, it’s those who have guns who are the ultimate decision-makers in the role of civil society.

Since civil society was not part of the CPA, a sense of ownership of the peace agreement was not inculcated in Sudanese civil society. For this reason, and although the CPA put an end to the longest civil war in Africa, it received a cold or ambivalent reception from civil society and opposition political parties, which were also kept away from the peace process. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) an umbrella of armed political parties based in Asmara, was not part of the peace process. The NDA was allied to the SPLM. The Sudan Government viewed NDA as part of the SPLM, while the IGAD mediators looked at the peace process as an affair between the two parties only.⁸ Not being part of the peace process and government restrictions curtailed the engagement of civil society in peace building. A former president of the Sudanese Writers’ Union thus laments: “We were banned in 1989 and were only allowed to re-register in 2006; after seventeen years. The lift of our ban came one year after the signing of the peace agreement. We were not part of it, but we see it as a national duty to promote peace. Unfortunately the government is restricting us.”⁹

The same exclusion of civil society that characterized the CPA was also present in the Darfur peace talks in Abuja, Nigeria. The Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) was signed in 2006 without the participation of Darfur civil society organizations.

Referring to the absence of civil society in the Abuja peace talks, Tubiana argues that “in 2004, one of the main rebel leaders explained to me that there is something called the government and something called the rebels. Both have guns and fight. It is the job of those two armed forces to stop the war. The international community held a similar view, and civil society thus had no official role in the peace process at Abuja” (2013, 166). In a similar fashion, King argues that negotiations “tend to take place with representatives of violent actors and not non-violent actors. This leads to a paradox: violent actors who may be unrepresentative of groups on whose behalf they purport to be fighting, are perceived to be valid spokespersons because they can influence or control the use of violence; whereas members of civil society who are actually representatives of such groups, are perceived not to be valid spokespersons because of their inability to influence or control the violent actors” (2009, 13–14).

A few years later the situation changed and civil society took part in the Doha peace talks that culminated in the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur in 2011. A closer look at the involvement of civil

society in this process helps illustrate the complexity surrounding the role of civil society in peace building. Here, however, it is necessary to conceptualize peace building in ways that make the contribution or involvement of civil society in it intelligible, especially given the fact that civil society in Sudan was absent in the formal process of peace making in the country; with the exception of

the recent involvement of the Darfur civil society.

According to Sørnbø (2004, 1v), peace building “commonly refers to a set of transitional activities to implement peace agreements after civil wars. Activities normally include managing the transition from relief to economic recovery and longer term development; return of refugees and displaced persons; security sector reform, (re)constructing social and economic

“In 2004, one of the main rebel leaders explained to me that there is something called the government and something called the rebels. Both have guns and fight.”

J. Tubiana

infrastructure, (re)building political institutions for democratic rule; and promoting human rights and accountability for past violations in a system of transitional justice.” To implement the activities that peace building entails, the following mechanisms can be considered: constitution-making, grassroots projects (empowerment), watchdog institutions, embracing a culture of peace, and promoting tolerance and multiculturalism. These are areas where civil society can intervene and contribute to peace building. This list is not exhaustive, and the contribution of civil society may not necessarily include all these mechanisms as not all civil society organizations have the capacities to engage with all of them. The examples in this paper show that in most cases, civil society organizations engage with only one or two of these aspects; e.g., grassroots projects that target empowering local communities, or civil society being watchdog institutions for peace-building efforts. Regardless of what civil society can or cannot do, its involvement in peace building can be conceptualized as either 1) formal, in the sense of participating in the early stages of negotiating peace—either as part of the negotiating table or as observers; or 2) informal, in the sense that civil society often contributes to and supplements formal activities carried out by governments and UN bodies. Both tendencies exist in Sudan; the former can be seen in the involvement of the Darfur civil society in the Doha peace process, and the latter in the case of the Sudanese Writers’ Union and Sudan Organization for Research and Development, in their engagement with cultural issues and local empowerment, respectively, as mechanisms of peace building, as shown in the examples below.

Darfur civil society and peace process

Continuing since 2002, the crisis in Darfur drew the attention of the international community perhaps more than any other recent crisis. But such attention has not culminated hitherto in resolving the conflict. Many accounts dealt with the crisis in its multifaceted dimensions (cf. Sørnbø and Ahmed 2013; Assal 2009; I. D. F and Assal 2010; Mamdani 2010; Tanner and Tubiana 2007; De Waal 2005; Prunier 2006). There are a number of factors that led to the appearance and escalation of the crisis, some of which are national and others international and yet others are local

(Assal 2009). Here, however, we are interested in civil society and its involvement in the peace process in Darfur.

As early as 2004, there were efforts to bring peace to Darfur. The first of such efforts was the Ndjamenan Ceasefire Agreement, followed by the 2006 DPA signed in Abuja, Nigeria. The DPA, signed by only one rebel group, was based on a government-rebel framework similar to that adopted for the CPA, but did not bring peace and instead complicated the situation on the ground. There was a complete absence of civil society in the process, and “the general view, notably in Darfur, was that the 2006 agreement had been written and signed by armed parties that did not represent Darfur civilians” (Tubiana 2013, 166).

The armed groups rejected the inclusion of civil society in the Abuja peace talks based on the assumption that those without guns do not have power. However, according to Murphy and Tubiana, “as rebel groups fragmented and it became clear that the DPA was a failure, many commentators began to assert that working with civil society could offer an alternative to deal with fragmented and obstinate rebels. Opinions on the subject both among rebel movements and those in the international community have remained divided, with some continuing to advocate a pure track-one approach” (2010, 3). Back in 2004, many Darfur notables saw the necessity of involving civil society in the peace process. The type of civil society that resulted from this was the Darfur Forum for Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence. The Forum’s first chairman was Ibrahim Suliman, former army general, minister of defense and North Darfur governor (2001–2003). Suliman was a committed member of the ruling party, the National Congress Party (NCP). Despite this, Suliman commanded the respect of Darfuris across ethnic and political loyalties and as such the Forum included Darfuris from all political parties and ethnic groups. Even though the Forum was dominated by Khartoum-based elites, this diversity made it “an ideal organization for the international community to support. International support, however, made it more visible and subject to external interference and internal divisions” (ibid.).

The Forum succeeded in participating in meetings in Libya during 2004 and 2005 and gained the trust of some armed groups (ibid., 3). Although Ibrahim Suliman was a ruling party member, the government was concerned about the Forum and created a rival

body, the Forum for Peace and Development, chaired by another retired army general and former Governor of South Darfur, Adam Hamid Musa. The Darfur Forum for Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence later collapsed due to internal conflicts. The Forum could not hold together members and overcome divisions dictated by its members' political affiliations.

The example of the Darfur Forum for Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence shows that in the context of conflicts and divided societies, the possibility of the civil society having influence independent of the political parties almost does not exist. According to Mohamed, "Darfuri elites who were not aligned with either party...were entirely shut out from representation in Darfur's interim structures" (2008, 210). However, while the Forum does not exist as a coherent body, its members continued to engage in the various meetings related to peace in Darfur, like the meetings organized by The Max Planck Institute in Germany and Concordis International in the aftermath of the DPA, during the period of 2007–2009. The Forum members "were ethnically diverse, however, and a significant number of participants [in these meetings] seemed to express positions specific to their tribe rather than to their political party. For others, political affiliations seemed equally important to tribal ones. Despite the divisions, these meetings showed the ability of the participants to reach consensus on major issues, such as land, coexistence and security" (Murphy and Tubiana 2010, 4).

A major involvement of the different Darfur civil society organizations in the peace process took place in November 2009 in Doha, Qatar. This involvement came as a result of establishing a "track-two" process; an additional civil society track—track one being the government-rebel negotiations. Gathered at the

meeting were 170 civil society delegates. Although not perfect in terms of selection of delegates—there was a concern that a number of delegates were chosen by the government—the final declaration of the Doha civil society gathering emphasized the important role of civil society: "Negligence of the civil society role in the peace process is one of the factors that led to the failure of the previous peace resolutions as negotiations were only confined between the government and the armed groups."¹⁰

The influence of the government on civil society, however, cannot be overlooked. As mentioned earlier, the government does this either through creating its own civil society (e.g., Forum for Peace and Development) or influencing civil society through other means. A UNDP (2009) report maintains: "A conspicuous feature of present Sudanese CSOs is the blurred dividing lines between governmental and non-governmental organizations as processes of political manipulation are quite visible and apparent."

"Negligence of the civil society role in the peace process is one of the factors that led to the failure of the previous peace resolutions as negotiations were only confined between the government and the armed groups."

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The report also reveals that there are 471 Darfuri civil society organizations. This figure represents CSOs registered with HAC and excludes trade unions and professional associations, cultural groups, and faith-based organizations.

The involvement of government in civil society affairs, however, should not be looked at entirely negatively. While such involvement may be seen as a concession to the government's sovereignty, it is a necessary aspect for the success of civil society. As seen from the example of the Darfur Forum for Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence, the chair of the Forum, a retired army general, although an NCP member, is widely accepted across the political spectrum and represents a local constituency. His political commitment does not preclude other commitments.

During the Doha civil society gathering, many ruling party members, especially traditional leaders, did not always maintain the official government position. Many preferred to speak primarily on behalf of their communities. The Darfuri armed groups also influence civil society. Murphy and Tubiana argue that “the various civil society meetings have shown that on the main issues of the conflict, civil society positions are much closer to those of the rebels than to those of the government” (2010, 7).

When it comes to local level dynamics, there is more to civil society in Darfur than being aligned to, or influenced by, the government and armed groups. Tribal affiliation delineates the identity of CSOs in Darfur to the extent that almost every tribe has its NGO. There is also overrepresentation of educated elites (ibid., 10) who are based either in Khartoum or in other major towns of Darfur. The influence of civil society in Darfur on rural areas is limited due to lack of security

and access. In soliciting the participation of Darfuri civil society in Doha, the facilitators, mainly the United Nations African Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), were mindful of local level dynamics and therefore tried to represent the following civil society bodies: traditional leaders, internally displaced persons and refugees, women and youth, and intellectuals. But there were serious challenges of selection (Murphy and Tubiana 2010, 13–17). Advancing women and youths represents a challenge to traditional mechanisms of reconciliation in Darfur as such mechanisms were traditionally the prerogatives of men and elders.

In terms of the roles played in Doha, participants of the Darfur civil society took part in three major events: the Doha 1 conference in November 2009, the Doha 2 conference in July 2010, and the All Darfur Stakeholders Conference (ADSC) in May 2011 (Tubiana 2013, 167). As can be seen from the dates of these events, there are long intervals during which civil society organizations were absent.

One of the main challenges facing the Darfur civil society in Doha was division and alignment with one party or the other. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) in major camps in Darfur were represented in the Doha 2 conference, but there were rifts among civil society organizations representing IDPs. The IDP camps of Kalma in South Darfur and Hamadiya in Central Darfur were represented in Doha 2. According to Tubiana, “when their delegates returned to the camps with no achievement other than a very weak document—but with money and presents they had received at Doha—fighting erupted between pro-Doha and anti-Doha IDPs..., 35 people were killed in Kalma and 25,000 fled the camp” (ibid.).

In sum, the inclusion of the Darfuri civil society in the Doha peace process is akin to the inclusion of the silent majority of the population in Darfur, as those who took part have constituencies across political, ethnic and tribal lines, even if the mediators failed to bring to Doha the most

“Civil society positions are much closer to those of the rebels than to those of the government.”

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influential individuals. The inclusion of civil society is also a by-product of the mediators’ frustration with lack of progress in the track-one process (government-rebels negotiations). One implication here is that track two may not be encouraged if track one succeeds. Whether adopting maximalist or minimalist perspectives, the participation of civil society must not be an epilogue to track one. The Doha peace talks resulted in signing an agreement between the Sudan government and the Liberation and Justice Movement (LJM) in 2011. The role of the Darfuri civil society in consolidating this agreement is not clear so far, but one of the challenges facing the agreement is that, like previous peace deals, it was not inclusive. Many armed groups in Darfur were not party to it. Darfur is still an active war front, which makes it difficult for civil society to engage in promoting peace meaningfully and effectively or to sell peace agreements to their constituencies.

It should be noted that problems within the Darfur Regional Authority, represented by the Liberation and

Justice Movement (LJM), which was the signatory to the Doha Peace Document, also represent a serious setback to peace building efforts in Darfur. Ethnic rivalry between the Fur and Zaghawa led to conflicts between Tigani Sese, Chairman of the LJM and President of Darfur Regional Authority, and Bahar Idris Abugarda, Secretary General of the LJM. This conflict brought to the formation of two political parties: the National Liberation and Justice Party, headed by Tigani Sese, and the Liberation Justice Party, headed by Bahar Idris Abugarda. This affects the efforts of civil society engagement since most of them, in the case of Darfur, are ethnically based. The following section analyzes two Khartoum-based civil society organizations that provide a different example of the engagement of civil society in peace building.

Sudanese Writers Union (SWU)

The Sudanese Writers Union (SWU) is one of the few platforms for intellectual debate in the country. The Union works through culture to promote dialogue and seek solutions to conflicts. Emphasizing Sudan's multi-cultural identity and rigorously promoting the right of all people to express their culture and beliefs, it brings together writers of different disciplines, intellectual orientations, regional backgrounds, genders and ethnicities.

Founded on the restoration of democracy in 1985, the union quickly became an important space for informed discussion. Two days after the military coup in 1989, it was banned and its members subjected to harassment, torture and detention. Re-emerging after the signing of the peace agreement in 2005, it currently has about three hundred members. Regular meetings attract two hundred participants for candid debate on vital issues such as Darfur, cultural diversity, identity, and governance issues. Through publications in daily newspapers, including articles by members living in exile, the union spreads informed opinions. It hosts international intellectuals, participates in international conferences and engages with regional and international issues. The Union publishes a journal twice a year. *Karama*, the Union's Journal, includes the contribution of renowned Sudanese writers, academics and intellectuals and covers aspects related to identity, culture and governance.

The Union's broad objectives include the following: (1) to safeguard freedom of speech, writing, publishing and all relative aspects of intellectual activities; (2) to reflect the multicultural identity of Sudan; and (3) to interact with the regional and international sisterly organizations that work in favor of world peace, friendship between nations, maintaining the culture of human rights and having a strong stand against any kind of discrimination, whether it is exercised on the basis of race, color, beliefs, or gender. The Union depends for its funding on members' fees, donations and project-based funding from donors.

While based in Khartoum, the SWU implements activities in different parts of the country. During 2008–2009, SWU implemented peace-building activities in Juba (South Sudan, while the country was still united), the Blue Nile, and Gedarif. The Union also has constituencies outside the national capital. Importantly, however, SWU holds an annual conference that addresses a certain issue of relevance to peace and cultural diversity in the country.

For the annual conference, the Union must get permission from security services and, to the extent that the Union is considered a cultural group, it usually gets permission for its activities. At times, however, some activities are banned by the security apparatus. "Sometimes we receive a visit by security agents who tell us that a certain activity must not take place. We do not have a choice but to acquiesce. The alternative is to have problems with the security system," says the Union's secretary general. Over a period of four years, however, only once was an activity actually banned.

Since its resurrection in 2006, the SWU held six conferences: 1) "Toward a Democratic Project for Peaceful Culture" in 2007; 2) "The Intellectual and Authorities" in 2008; 3) "Cultural Diversity and the Future of Sudan between Unity and Secession" in 2009; 4) "Citizenship and Self-determination" in 2010; 5) "The Future of Nation-State in Sudan" in 2011; and 6) "Our Civilization Heritage" in 2012. Most, if not all, of the conferences, which were held after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, were directly related to peace building. The Union publishes the conference proceedings in a book, which is distributed during the conference. Some of the material also gets published in the Union's journal.

Apart from the above-mentioned conferences and regular cultural and intellectual activities in which the SWU is engaged, in 2010 and 2011, the Union implemented specific activities in the Blue Nile and Juba in Southern Sudan. The choice of these two locations was not coincidental: Juba Juba was the seat of the Government of South Sudan. In a gesture of showing unity and calling for cultural tolerance in May 2010, the SWU undertook two activities the objective of which was to emphasize cultural diversity as a resource and sign of strength. The first forum, which took place on 12 May 2010, was on cultural diversity and the future of Sudan. The second forum took place on 15 May 2010 and was on the future of the country, with speakers debating prospects of unity and secession and calling on political leaders to work hard for preserving the unity of the country.

The SWU also undertook a three-day workshop on transitional justice, on 24 May 2010 in Juba. The purpose of the workshop was to emphasize the importance of transitional justice in healing war-torn societies. The workshop presentations covered many aspects,

“including the role of investigating past crimes and identifying those responsible as a pre-condition for peace and reconciliation, providing reparations to victims; preventing future abuses; preserving and enhancing peace; and the institutional and legal reforms in the post-conflict era. The workshop closed by presenting many movies about the experience of truth and reconciliation groups in different countries including South Africa, Morocco, and East Timor. Participants expressed their appreciation in taking part in such workshop which exposed them to rich experiences from other countries that can be applicable in the case of Sudan.” (SWU 2011, 6)

A second intervention of the SWU is the cultural week in Damazin (the Blue Nile State). The Blue Nile was chosen, first, because the area was accorded a special status in the CPA (it was dealt with as one of the three contested areas—the other two being Abyei and the Nuba Mountains). Second, the Blue Nile is rich in cultural diversity and since one of the objectives of the SWU is to promote cultural diversity, the Blue Nile became a natural choice. The SWU cultural week took place in March 2010 in the two

major towns in the area, Damazin and Roseiris. One key activity was a forum on Sudanese folklore and identity. The forum is one component of the cultural week organized in Damazin by the Sudanese Writers Union, which occurs in March 2010. Main issues highlighted during the forum were the general and common characteristics of the different Sudanese cultures and the manifestation of Sudanese folklore in maintaining Sudanese identity. The presentation also highlighted the potential role of music in enhancing and sustaining an inclusive and a just peace in Sudan. During the forum a documentary film reflecting traditional dances from all over the country was also presented. Over one hundred people attended the forum (SWU 2011, 11).

In addition to the forum on folklore, a number of other activities were undertaken during the cultural week in the Blue Nile. These included creating murals of cultural diversity in one of the oldest schools in the Blue Nile—the Amara Dungus Schools. Eight artists from Khartoum and Damazin worked on the murals, attracting a big audience. Children were invited and encouraged to contribute. Additionally, musical instruments like the waza (big wooden horns blown by the Berta tribe) were played in Roseiris, also attracting hundreds of people. The waza was usually played during peaceful festivities and is considered part of the local identity and heritage. By proposing these activities, the SWU contributes to preserving local cultures which is, in a way, part of the peace-building efforts (ibid., 12).

The SWU’s approach to peace building is cultural. The opening statement of its constitution reads: “Our nation is made up from different religions, cultures and languages. Many civilizational currents intervened to mould our current realities in unique way. This diversity should not be an element of friction and war, rather it should be a totality for sustainable peace and national unity.”¹¹ In his opening speech at the cultural week in Damazin, SWU’s President emphasized the thinking behind the constitution: “Our country, Sudan, which is often described as a microcosm of Africa, with its cultural, religious and climatic diversity, is unique. Nonetheless, such rich diversity is yet to be understood by the Sudanese as an element of strength, especially after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that addressed some problems related to our diversity. But still some

issues remain and require engagement. This cultural week shall tackle some of these issues, particularly bringing out aspects that were reflected upon at the national level.”¹²

SWU’s contribution to peace building is cultural and this shows that civil society can aid peace building from a certain angle or perspective. Here, one can look at the involvement of the SWU in terms of process and activities: the process is using culture as a vehicle for work and through activities that are culturally anchored. The question then relates to what the outcome of such involvement is. Regrettably, the efforts of the SWU did not contribute to the objectives envisaged: South Sudan seceded in 2011 and war broke out in the Blue Nile about the same time. But it would be shortsighted to blame the SWU or to dub its interventions as ineffective. The environment of peace building in Sudan is difficult and civil society organizations face too many challenges while doing their work, as stated previously.

One of the main challenges facing civil societies like the Sudanese Writers Union is that those who have coercive power do not listen to those who do not. Of note is that the Sudanese Writers Union was banned in 1989 and could only be allowed to resume its work in 2006, after the signing of the CPA. Also, the government views civil society with suspicion, hence it is not supportive of its peace-building initiatives, although it may seem unclear. Obviously, in a context where the government expels NGOs working in humanitarian and emergency situations and distributing relief, it is more likely that civil society engaging in peace building through civic activities will not be encouraged (Pantuliano et al., 2009).

SWU was banned by the government in early 2015. In October 2015, a court ruled that the allegations of the government against SWU were baseless. However, the legal process is still ongoing and it may take years before SWU can be allowed to resume its work.

Sudan Organization for Research and Development (SORD)

The Sudanese Organization for Research and Development (SORD) is a membership-based, national, non-governmental organization established in 2007 and dedicated to human rights and development in Sudan. SORD works towards

empowering citizens of Sudan to actively enjoy their rights and responsibilities through an informed advocacy and knowledge base and through capacity building of civil society organizations. SORD is a gender-focused organization whereby the project activities, staff structure, work environment and targeting are all geared towards gender equality and balancing gender power relations at all of those levels.

SORD started with 36 members. Already in 2012, its membership had reached 67. A board of trustees is elected from within every two years. It is responsible for policy making and ensuring strategic and organizational direction set by the assembly. The board currently consists of ten members (SORD 2013, 4). SORD’s executive body is a small core team of highly professional staff that provides the necessary technical expertise for the implementation of the planned activities. The executive body also has responsibility over management, monitoring of the programs, administrative work and day-to-day operations of the organization. The gender female/male ratio among the staff is 2:1, with women taking senior positions.

SORD’s advocacy engagement

SORD implements a number of programs, including work on gender justice with support from Oxfam Novib. More initiatives within the same program have materialized: covering women’s empowerment through education, supported by GOAL; enhancing women’s leadership, supported by the Finland Embassy; and women taking action and claiming their rights, funded by the European Community. In partnership with the Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) in Sudan, SORD started a project entitled “Joining Hands to End Child Marriage in Sudan” but this project did not continue “owing to problems NCA was having with HAC, and also to the fact that authorities were not cooperative” (SORD 2013, 10). The year 2012 has also witnessed the conclusion of three projects; namely, the “Promotion of Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities among Youth and Women in Sudan,” “Empowering Civil Society in Sudan to Combat Discrimination,” and “Promoting Legal Reform through a Judicial Evidence Approach.”

SORD’s training packages cover areas of human rights education, leadership skills, developing participatory action research methodology and a

training package to improve youth's ability to organize. In addition to that, SORD also has conducted research in the areas of discrimination, HIV and gender-based violence, and family law in practice. In 2012 SORD ventured in piloting a revolving fund initiative to support victims of family law coupled with provision of technical training for women. The establishment and growth of three networks in Khartoum, White Nile and Gezira, which are focusing on women's and girls' rights, have taken the impact of SORD's work beyond the direct targeting and are strengthening its sustainability and continuity. In 2012, SORD worked with youth, women, and civil society organizations and extended its operations to more areas in Khartoum, Kassala, Gezira, the White Nile and River Nile States.

One of the main objectives of SORD is diminishing the gender gap in Sudan and enhancing women participation and leadership. Needless to say that diminishing the gender gap and enhancing the participation of women are seen as necessary elements of peace building, as demonstrated by the mediators' efforts to include women and youth in the Darfur peace process in Doha. In the realization of this objective SORD has succeeded, as shown by the following (SORD 2013, 5-7):

1. Attempts were made to amend the 1991 law led by the Sudanese general women union and the ministry of social welfare.
2. A working relationship has started between SORD and the ministry of social welfare for the purpose of enhancing the effort to ensure the participation of women in leadership positions.
3. The current efforts of drafting a civil constitution in Sudan led by civil society have recognized the importance of mainstreaming family laws when talking about women's constitutional rights. This was spearheaded by SORD through the series of workshops undertaken specifically on family law. SORD organized a high-level conference on family law attended by high-level government officials, political parties, civil society and the media.
4. New women structures emerged; namely, the Women Parliament in Gezira and the Women Forum in the White Nile State. Both structures include women from all walks of life such as female farmers, petty traders, lawyers, teachers, workers, journalists, doctors, parliamentarians, and civil servants. Another element of diversity is the presence of women from civil society, from political parties and from the government. The impact so far has materialized as follows:
 - a. The emerging bodies have helped women to reach a common working agenda that rotates around women's rights and interests at the states level. In this respect, the work on girls' education has captured the attention of a wide variety of concerned bodies, including the ministry of education itself. Certain recommendations were reached to reduce dropout rates of girls and to improve the school environment in order to attract families and girls to education in the Gezira State. The coverage of the activities through local and social media reflected the importance of girls' education in the very state where girls' education started in Sudan.
 - b. The parliament was able to establish a number of branches at the locality levels (4 branches so far). Those branches are focusing on improving women's conditions and enabling women to voice their issues and concerns at the local level. Issues such as water and sanitation, unpaid labor, child marriage and others become part of the agenda, with local authorities being looked at based on their performance at the locality and village levels.
 - c. The work with and for women in agriculture has produced many levels of impact, among them: (1) women farmers are more aware of their rights as farmers and want to have a voice; (2) a dialogue has started for the first time between the coalition of Gezira farmers and the women farmers. This coalition is exclusively male dominated. This dialogue is opening the door for female farmers to join the coalition as well as opening the eyes of the male farmers to women's concerns in the area of agriculture and farming.

- d. A strategic plan has already been developed by the Women Forum in the White Nile State and has already directed its interventions around women rights, reproductive health, clean environmental health and quality, basic education.
5. The “let her grow up” forum to end child marriage has started its activities and has been recognized as an independent body with a specific mandate. The forum inaugurated its work with a press conference and wide media coverage. *Adila*, a documentary on family law, has created wide impact at both local and international levels where more than 5,000 watched the film. SORD is still getting requests for copies of the movie. This film is now used independent of SORD by other civil society organizations and women rights advocates.

SORD’s peace-building modality

While SORD was not part of formal peace making (it was established one year after the CPA was already signed), much of what it does is part and parcel of the peace-building process given the broad conceptualization of peace building adopted in this paper. Peace building is not confined to formal arrangements reached by signatories or government institutions. Two of SORD’s main contributions are grassroots empowerment and SORD being a watchdog for peace building.

SORD’s grassroots involvement in peace building is a contribution to conflict reduction and mitigation. This is achieved through livelihood interventions in eastern Sudan (Kassala State) and poor areas in Khartoum. Long years of war led to depletion of resources, poverty, competition over resources and conflict in eastern Sudan. SORD’s support in eastern Sudan includes education and income-generating

activities. The process of SORD’s involvement includes advocacy and direct intervention. A vehicle used in the process is “the promotion of responsible citizens which we see as the most important pillar and condition for sustainable peace,” argues SORD’s programming director. Working with youth to build their capacities in communication and leadership skills as a basis for sustainable peace is another area where SORD is engaged.

One particular project implemented by SORD over a two-year period (2010–2012) exemplifies its function as a watchdog. The project consisted in the promotion of citizenship rights and responsibilities among youth and women in Sudan. The objectives of this project were 1) enhancing civic education among youth and women to boost their contribution to peace building; 2) improving the level of responsiveness of media to issues of citizenship and rights; and 3) strengthening the lobbying and advocacy capacity of CSOs to pressure the government for implementing peace and introducing legal reforms especially in human rights and family law (SORD 2013). SORD’s perspective on peace building is summarized as follows: “Our approach to peace building is in line with our capacities and work philosophy. Our quest for peace building is done through working with root causes of conflicts. Inequalities, injustice, and lack of awareness about rights are some of the

core questions SORD addresses. One cannot build peace without empowering citizens about their rights and responsibilities. When people know their rights and responsibilities, they embrace a sense of ownership for what they take part in.”¹³

Since peace building entails inclusion of marginalized segments, what SORD does is a direct contribution to sustainable peace. A

project focused on “enhancing women’s leadership and participation in Gezira and Blue Nile States” was implemented as a result. This is a one-year project that aims at empowering women so that their

“When people know their rights and responsibilities, they embrace a sense of ownership for what they take part in.”

*Opening speech of the
Sudanese Writers Union
President*

voices are heard at the policy and practice levels. By identifying women's strengths, and their weaknesses and knowledge/literacy gaps, this project is adopting a participatory approach to create dialogue and reflection platforms for potential female leaders in the two states (SORD 2013, 6).

The process involved targeting women in the two states with the objective of debating relevant and pertinent issues in post-conflict situations. The activities implemented included capacity-building workshops on gender mainstreaming, women rights targeting women leaders in each of the two states, two dialogue forums on action points for improving girls' education, and two dialogue forums on what women see as priorities in the two states. Some of the outcomes of SORD's activities in the two states were building on the abilities of 520 potential women leaders, upgrading women's concerns, and repositioning priorities at the strategic level of political parties.

Despite all these achievements, SORD is not without challenges. Like other civil society organizations, SORD is threatened with closure. Unlike SWU, SORD is registered with the Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC), which means that it is closely monitored by the security services, more so than SWU, which is part of the Ministry of Culture. SORD's programming director argues that they "are constantly under the threat of closure by security. Our work in the personal status law is sensitive and seen as problematic. This is why we did not succeed to register at the level of Khartoum State, even though we are registered at the federal level and theoretically should be able to operate. But if we do not register in Khartoum state, we will not be allowed to work."¹⁴

On many occasions, SORD employees were harassed and interrogated by the security. This happened in Khartoum and the River Nile States. While SORD succeeded in registering a branch in Kassala, its efforts to open an office in the Red Sea State were hitherto unsuccessful. Its application was pending for five years. Unlike the Sudanese Writers Union, SORD has no financial problems. It receives funding from many donors. Its main challenge is the pressing political environment in Sudan. What SORD and SWU are facing, in terms of restrictions on their activities and threats of revoking their registration, is part of an overall strategy of the government to

crack down on civil society. For instance, between November and December 2012, the government shut down five civil society organizations. These include Beit al Finoon, the Sudanese Studies Centre (SSC), Arry Organization, the Narrative and Criticism Forum (NCF), and the Al-Khatim Adlan Centre for Enlightenment and Human Development (KACE). Back in 2009, the government annulled the registration of three Sudanese civil society organizations after they were accused of having links with the International Criminal Court. Receiving funding from donors is also restricted by the law. It is noteworthy to mention that Article 7 of the Voluntary and Humanitarian Work Act requires that all fundraising should be approved by HAC and that, "no civil society organization registered under the provisions of this Act shall receive funds or grants from abroad or from foreign persons ... without the approval of the minister" (HAC 2006, article 7 (1) and (2)).

Discussion and conclusions

Civil society organizations in Sudan are not homogeneous entities, neither in terms of functions nor in terms of types. They are composed of diverse elements that reflect political cleavages and conflicts of the societies in which they exist. For instance, civil society in Darfur consists of traditional leaders, women and youth, intellectuals, and internally displaced persons and refugees. As the examples of the two rival Darfuri Forums illustrate, a total separation between civil society and the state is also uncalled for and is not necessary.

The analysis in the paper shows that we need to be aware of excessive romanticization of the role of civil society in peace building. Donors have their own conceptions about civil society and so do local actors—government officials, security staff, local communities, etc. The analysis also shows that we need to adopt broader perspectives and conceptualizations of both civil society organizations and peace building. In contexts of difficult environments like Sudan, it is farfetched to conceptualize peace building in terms of direct involvement of civil society organizations in peace talks. The example of the Darfur civil society involvement in the Doha peace process illustrates this. If the role of civil society is narrowly conceptualized through direct or formal engagement, we can

conclude that civil society, especially in Sudan, has no role in peace building. This does not do justice to CSOs. The cases of SWU and SORD are examples where civil society can contribute to peace building indirectly or informally. In any case, formal peace efforts were stalled in Sudan. Currently there are active war fronts in Darfur, the Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains. In these circumstances, it will not be easy to talk about categorical success or failure of CSOs. What matters is the description and analysis of what they do in terms of peace-building efforts.

As products of certain historical and political conditions, what civil society organizations do or do not do is a reflection of the conditions that lead to their existence. Civil society is used as a code for values and institutions that people think may provide answers to questions that the state fails to address. The involvement of the Darfur civil society in the peace process, regardless of the actual outcome of such involvement, came about when the mediators realized that government-rebels negotiations were not sufficient to bring peace to Darfur. Likewise, the involvement of SWU and SORD in advocacy work that aims at diminishing the gender gap or emphasizing the positive contribution of cultural diversity is a result of the conviction that the state, for whatever reasons, is unable to accomplish its obligations. Vibrant or not, civil society organizations are part of conflicting interests that include the state, donors, and international politics. As Assal (2009) argues, the conflicting positions of the different actors and stakeholders contribute to prolonging the crisis in Darfur. One relevant, if narrow, conceptualization of peace building is that of Roland Paris (2004, 38): “Actions undertaken at the end of a civil conflict to consolidate peace and prevent a recurrence of fighting.” As the Sudan case illustrates, peace building and peace making are not necessarily sequential; they go together. Darfur is an example where efforts of peace making and peace building go side by side with, with little success on either front. This is perhaps one reason for the impact of civil society organizations not being visible or being minimal as these organizations are sucked into different types of conflicts. The fragmentation of the Darfur Forum for Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence is a case in point.

The contrasting examples of SORD and SWU, on the one hand, and the Darfuri civil society, on the other, not only illustrate Sudan’s protracted conflict

but also how the state, armed groups, and civil society are entangled in dynamics of mutual mistrust. This is manifest in the different peace processes, starting from the CPA, passing through DPA and finally to the Doha Peace process (2009–2013). Having said this, civil society in Sudan does not contribute to war even though, as mentioned earlier and in the context of Darfuri civil society, it was found that civil society positions are much closer to those of the armed groups. There is no evidence that civil society is actively contributing to conflict. On the contrary, evidence shows that civil society strives to promote peace even though it is difficult to pinpoint the effectiveness of its contribution. One thing is clear though, civil society can contribute by putting pressure on the government and armed groups to engage in peace negotiations. This way, civil society eclipses hardliners and forces them to talk. The contribution of civil society can be conceptualized as follows: putting pressure on track-one parties; providing actual input; and selling peace agreements to grassroots. The last aspect, selling peace agreements to grassroots, is something that requires researching, especially at the level of community-based organizations (CBOs).

Government restrictions and, to a lesser degree, armed groups’ ambivalence, are a significant hurdle facing civil society. In this regard, there are two scenarios, which are somehow contrasting. In the CPA and DPA, civil society organizations were left out, excluded, and left to deal with the aftermath of the agreement. In the Doha peace process, civil society organizations were present but with little success as there were complaints about representation, government infiltration, etc. Restrictions imposed by the Voluntary and Humanitarian Work Act of 2006 inhibit civil society organizations from realizing their potential. Organizations like SORD can make a difference, but are not allowed to. The government not only restricts the work of civil society organizations, but also, at times, shuts them down, as happened in 2009, 2012 and 2015.

One major issue that needs to be addressed is that civil society organizations are not entrenched locally. The examples of SWU and SORD show that these two otherwise active organizations are based in Khartoum but implement activities in other places. If they do not have a presence outside Khartoum (which SORD has), their influence is reduced. An entrenched

presence in local communities implies strong ability to put pressure and also implies better knowledge about local issues and concerns. Certainly there are capable individuals leading these organizations, but one of their weaknesses is that they are more involved in political issues than in the local communities.

Finally, by adopting broader conceptualizations of civil society that allow for the inclusion of diverse groups such as traditional leaders, faith-based organizations, women, youth, ethnically-based associations, professional societies, trade unions, and student unions, we will be in a position to better conceptualize the role of civil society in peace building. This is particularly the case in multi-ethnic and multicultural societies, especially where conflict is rampant. In divided societies like Darfur, the emergence of civil society is closely related to tribal affiliation and as stated earlier, almost every tribe has its own organization. Researchers should accept such anomalies. After all, what matters in social analysis are not the constructs that we use for the purpose of understanding, but the reality for which we employ our heuristic categories.

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Notes

- 1 The 13 international NGOs are Action Contre la Faim (ACF), CARE International, Cooperative Housing Foundation (CHF), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Médecins Sans Frontières Holland (MSF-H) and Médecins Sans Frontières France (MSF-F), Mercy Corps, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Oxfam GB, the Planning and Development Collaborative International (PADCO) (PADCO technically describes itself as a development firm and not an NGO), Save the Children UK and Save the Children US, and Solidarités. The 3 national NGOs are Amal Centre for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, the Khartoum Centre for Human Rights Development and Environment and the Sudan Social Development Organisation (SUDO). For more details see Pantuliano et al. (2009).
- 2 <http://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article47562>, accessed 4 December 2013.
- 3 Interview, academic, October 2015.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 http://www.d-a.org.uk/releases/civil_society.htm, accessed 2 December 2013.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 This is a political process started by the ruling National Congress Party on 10 October 2015 in which allies of the government, few ineffective armed groups and political parties took part. The major political players, including armed groups from Darfur, the Sudan Revolutionary Front and the Umma Party led by Sadig El-Mahdi, boycott it.
- 8 In 2002, while the Machakos peace process was underway, the Sudanese Foreign Minister stated that “other opposition groups allied to the southern rebellion movement under the banner of NDA, an armed opposition group based in Asmara (Eritrea), needs to find its place within SPLA.” This means that the government does not recognize these groups. See more at: <http://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudanese-foreign-minister-urges-nda-join-spla-talks#sthash.BOaOXobB.dpuf>, accessed 2 December 2013.
- 9 Interview, a former SWU’s President, Khartoum, May 2013.
- 10 Final Declaration of the Consultative Meeting of the Darfurian Civil Society, 20 November 2009, Doha, Qatar. www.darfurinfo.org/doha-english-rough.pdf, accessed 20 November 2013.
- 11 Sudanese Writers Union Constitution.
- 12 Opening speech of the Sudanese Writers Union President in the inaugural session of the cultural week in Damazin, Blue Nile State, 14 March 2010.
- 13 Interview, Programming Director, SORD, Khartoum, August 2013.
- 14 Interview, Programming Director, SORD, Khartoum, May 2013.

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The role of civil society organizations in peace making and peace building is often valorized, especially in countries that witness protracted conflicts. The assumption underlying this valorization is that while conflicting parties sign peace deals, it is civil society organizations that undertake the implementation of such peace deals. A significant requirement for the success of civil society organizations in peace building is their inclusion in peace making in the first place. Such inclusion is indicative of the recognition accorded to civil society organizations and, conversely, their exclusion means that those who broker peace deals are not cognizant of the roles of these organizations. While civil society organizations may have negative roles or may even be party to conflicts, it is important to highlight the instances in which they are excluded from partaking in peace-making and peace-building engagements.

Taking the examples of Darfur civil society organizations, and two Khartoum-based ones, this research closely looks at the roles civil society organizations play in peace building, the modalities of playing such roles, and the challenges facing them. The research concludes that despite political repression, a deteriorating economy and active war in three parts of the country, civil society organizations in Sudan do contribute to peace making and peace building.