

United States Institute of Peace
Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Sudan Experience Project

Interview # 52 –Executive Summary

Interviewed by: W. Haven North
Initial interview date: January 5, 2007
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Starting in 2004, the interviewee worked for National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Sudan conducting focus group meetings on the political situation, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement's (CPA) implementation, and development issues.

The focus group methodology included training Sudanese moderators with various local languages and ethnicities, as well as selected locations to get a wide range of views in the North and South with equal numbers of men and women with different war experiences. Individual groups had about ten people, larger for the women with total 300-400 participants. There are four NDI reports for the southern areas and the “three areas” and one for the North.

The people in the focus groups, particularly the women, evidenced a deep weariness with the war. However, the southern groups had a strong feeling that, if they do not gain their rights, they will go back to war. On the CPA, they were particularly focused on the self-determination referendum. On the other protocols, there was only a vague awareness and less interest; except on the security issues, particularly that the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) should be moving out.

Improvements since the CPA so far are very basic, such as freedom of movement, expansion of markets, and lower prices. The CPA also helped dampen ethnic conflict, except in certain problem areas. When the people were asked what the war was about, they said discrimination (southern areas) and development (extreme dissatisfaction not seeing any development). Not much development is being accomplished, very hard to carry out with little communication and information about what is being done. There has been progress in the south on government formation; also some optimism in the North. Development priorities are, first, education and health; others relate to roads and water. A lot of planning is going on. Expectations are very high.

Local governments have been set up in Blue Nile, Southern Kordofan with rotating Southern Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM) and National Congress Party (NCP) governors. No local administration in Abyei. SPLM influence is weak. The “three areas” will be troublesome; people are not going to be patient.

The pilot census has been postponed. The referendum is in the planning stage. People in the South are 100 percent certain the Khartoum government is perpetuating the

strife in the South and arming local groups. The Darfur situation furthers pessimism, particularly in the three areas, i.e., the government is not willing to negotiate.

Regarding the role of the international community, it is seen as the savior in the South; it along with the SPLM will make the CPA a success. There is questioning of the monitors role, particularly in Abyei. The international community should be doing more; the situation is desperate.

On lessons, there should be a better understanding of expectations; better systems to communicate timelines and development successes. There is no trust that the Northern Government will act in good faith.

On the outcome of the referendum, despite various scenarios, the vote will be for separation; the southerners, according to the focus groups, are willing to sacrifice anything in order to be independent.

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Q: Let us start off by providing a context for this interview: what has been your role and association with Sudan?

A: I started out in Sudan for the first time in late 2004. I was called in by the National Democratic Institute as a consultant to conduct focus groups throughout southern Sudan on the general political situation, the peace agreement and other general topics along those lines, such as the opinion of the SPLM and the North leadership. Obviously, the peace agreement had not been signed then. The focus group meetings in both the North and the South were carried out every six months. The last NDI report focuses on the “three areas” of Abyei, southern Kordofan and Blue Nile states.

Q: And what have you been doing since then along those lines?

A: That work was funded by USAID; they funded three years of research along those lines. We have been going back into the field approximately once every six months; the topics vary. The second time we went into the field, we did focus groups on what people wanted in a Southern Sudan constitution. And then, we did a focus group study in the North about what northern citizens felt about the CPA and what impact they felt it would have on their lives. After John Garang’s death – obviously that was a major milestone – we went back into the field to see how attitudes and opinions changed based on that cataclysmic event. Our last report, which will be made public shortly, was focused on the three areas of Abyei, southern Kordofan and Blue Nile states. Obviously, those are border areas and they are critical areas in terms of maintaining the peace and so we wanted to do some in-depth study on that.

Q: Tell us about the process you use for focus groups so we understand how you came to your conclusions.

A: Methodologically, what we do is we recruit and train Sudanese moderators in a variety of languages. All of the focus groups are conducted in the local language at our location throughout the South or the “three areas.” We recruit and train these moderators. We select the locations in order to get a broad diversity of opinions. We make sure we have a number in Bahr el Ghazal, in Equatoria, and in the Upper Nile. We make sure there are a variety of ethnicities, languages, religions, and education levels. Obviously, we do about an equal number of men and women’s groups. The first time we made very sure that we

got different war experiences. In other words, these were the people who were in the middle of the fighting and somewhat further away and were not as directly impacted. Those are the factors we use in terms of selecting locations for doing the focus groups.

Q: How many in these groups?

A: An individual group is usually around ten people; but it can vary, depending on where we are. A chief's group, for example, will have a much smaller number of people, because they have very strong opinions and they talk a very long time. A women's group, where it is much harder to get someone to speak, or get a lot of people to speak, we usually have larger women's groups, in the hope that with larger numbers we will have enough people who will be willing to speak. So it depends. In general, we usually go for a total of between 300, 400, 450 participants as a whole, throughout all the areas we go. And, we usually go 10 to 16 different locations throughout southern Sudan.

Q: Only in the southern Sudan?

A: We did one focus group report in the North. The other four that we have done have been in southern Sudan or in the "three areas."

Q: Have you been in the Darfur area?

A: No. We were supposed to go a few months ago but things deteriorated, so we ended up not going.

Q: We have your reports; they are very helpful, but let us back up a bit. I know that the CPA process was not your direct interest, but do you have an understanding of what brought it about, why they even began the CPA process?

A: No, not the process itself. That is not what I was involved in. I can say from what people have said during the focus groups that, certainly among women, there was a deep weariness with the war. However, at the same time – you will see when you read the reports – while there was a deep weariness and everyone wanted the war to be over, there is still a very strong feeling that, if they do not gain their rights through this process, they are willing to go back to war.

Q: Was there much awareness of the CPA negotiation process as it was going on?

A: No, everybody knew it was going on. There was not a lot of awareness of the individual aspects of the negotiations, in terms of what provisions were being negotiated, what were the issues in play. When I talked to people, the only thing that they were really set on was the self-determination referendum. As long as that was in the CPA, they did not really care about much else.

Q: This is a pretty widespread view you are talking about?

A: Yes, and among regular people. When I do my focus groups I do not talk to government leaders or any people like that. I just talk to regular people.

Q: Of course, they were not familiar with how the process worked. What was their understanding of the final agreement?

A: People mostly focused on the self-determination referendum. Interestingly, on the power sharing aspects, they do not feel particularly involved in that or concerned in that as regular people. Actually, they viewed it as “Well, we are just biding our time until we can vote.” The whole Government of National Unity is not something that they invest in at this point and not something that, at least so far, leaders of Sudan have been able to get them invested in. When we did our last report we would ask about the Government of National Unity and people would say, “It is just a symbol. We are just doing that until the referendum comes along.” Clearly, there is not much faith or belief in the Government of National Unity.

Q: Was there an awareness of the wealth sharing and the security protocols?

A: Some. Not detailed, but some sense that the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) was going to be leaving the South. In the areas they formerly called ‘the garrison towns,’ Juba and Malakal, there is a greater awareness of the security issues, because that is where the SAF troops are stationed. In those areas, yes, there is much greater awareness and much stronger sense that these troops should be out of here by now.

Q: You have mentioned the referendum, but what about the elections? Do they know that those are part of the protocols?

A: No, not generally. I would not say there is a lot of knowledge about them. When you ask them about the elections, they are very excited about having elections. But not to the same extent that they are excited about the referendum, but they do see the elections as the appropriate way forward, free and fair elections, with the caveat that, of course, no Arabs can be involved. That is the way they put it.

Q: On the implementation of the CPA agreement, you have seen it over two or three years now. What do they perceive as the major changes that have occurred since the signing of the agreement and the situation now, as relates to the implementation of the CPA?

A: People see the improvements so far as very basic: freedom generally, freedom of movement, specifically. That is something they very much appreciate. In the bigger towns, there is the opening up and the expansion of markets. Like in Juba, in our focus group there, they talked about how prices have fallen in the market because of the opening and those types of things. And then just a general increase in security overall, because, at least thus far, the CPA has not only stopped the major war, but, according to my findings last time around, it had helped dampen some of the tribal issues that were throughout the South as well. Not all of them and certainly there are many issues that

remain, but I had quite a few comments throughout the groups where people said, “Well, people are trying to honor the CPA by not having these interethnic conflicts.”

Q: It had some impact, at least on the security aspects, right?

A: Yes, definitely. There are still certain problem areas, certain parts of Upper Nile where it has not had that impact, but apart from those problem areas, yes. The reports I have from people were that the CPA was serving a purpose in terms of dampening ethnic conflict as well as the overall conflict.

Q: Does that imply a sense of optimism about the future?

A: The usual problem is expectations. If you ask people about the war and the one reason why they are optimistic, they will say two things: discrimination and development. The discrimination aspect, at least for those in southern Sudan, has gone away. This change does not necessarily apply to the people in the “three areas.” But there is extreme disappointment in the fact that most people, with the exception of perhaps some people in Juba, do not see any development that has been a result of the CPA thus far. It depends on where you are, but some people have an inkling about funds not being transferred to the South or not enough funds being transferred in general. So there is some distrust. People are becoming concerned: “it has been two years and maybe the CPA is not going to bring development and that was one of the two major reasons we fought for twenty years. So what is this all about?”

Q: And what is your perception? Has any development taken place?

A: Very little. One thing: it is extremely hard to get things done. There is very little communication as well. People do not have much information and so they make decisions or form their opinions based on little information or inaccurate information. Because there are no real communication structures, it is hard for the Government of Southern Sudan to change those perceptions and attitudes. I know that is something they are working on, based on our past presentations to them about the importance of communications. Because of that, people are probably more pessimistic than they would be if there were greater access to information and understanding of the progress that has been made.

The problem is much of the progress that has been made is in the big picture sense. There have been governments established, constitutions passed, state governments set up. These all were major achievements and undertakings, but that does not do a lot for the life of the average person, at least not yet.

Q: You are speaking mainly about the South. What about the North?

A: I have not been able to get back to the North since June 2005 because of visa and other issues. In the North, I conducted a study in June 2005 and, at that time, people were fairly optimistic that the CPA was going to have some benefits for them, as well. Mainly

indirect benefits in terms of their sons not going off to war, the economic impact of having all that money spent on the war being reduced and those type of things. So among ordinary citizens in the North, there was a general optimism about the CPA and what it was going to be able to accomplish, indirectly, for them. It certainly was not the direct benefits that the southerners were getting, but there was certainly some benefit that they saw from it.

Q: What are the priority benefits that the southerners are looking for?

A: Education was number one; health was number two; and then when you get to number three it varies, depending on the location. Sometimes it is roads and transportation and sometimes it has to do with water, because in some places there are major water issues. We usually ask that question every time: "What are your priorities for your community and going forward for the South as a whole?" The answer is always education, number one; and health, number two.

Q: Are you aware of any development activities going on in those areas?

A: There is a lot of planning. That is not really what I do. I am not in the middle of all that, but there is certainly a Ministry of Education now in the South and a lot of planning. There is a lot of NGO involvement in education; there has been a radio program launched for distance learning; all of that is in the works, but at this point, people are still waiting for it to filter down to them.

Q: Do you think their expectations are so high that they are not going to be patient and maybe return to fighting?

A: It is interesting; the loss of John Garang was big for a lot of reasons. But one of the main reasons, after doing these reports, is that John Garang really had the ability to explain things and to have people exercise patience. He could say, "Okay, this is going to take a long time and this is the process" and people would accept it. That is what I found when he was still alive in 2004. But the government has not been as successful in communicating that way to people thus far, so right now, yes, their expectations are outsized for what the government can possibly do for them right now.

In terms of a return to fighting, I do not get the sense for that would happen, in the South proper. The problem is going to be in the "three areas," because those are the areas where you have the cultures clashing, i.e. to broadly generalize, the black African culture and the Arab culture coming together and residing in one place. It is also where the NCP and the SPLM have to rule together, in those "three areas." In those areas what you have is the black African population still feeling discriminated against and not seeing development, whereas, as I said before, in the South the discrimination thing has passed away. So, at least, one of the two major causes has been resolved in the South, according to what people tell me. But in the "three areas" you still have people feeling discriminated against. Again I cannot say what the reality is, but the perception is that

even though there is supposed to be power sharing there, the NCP is still in control of those “three areas.”

Q: Have they set up local governments in the “three areas?”

A: In two of the “three areas,” Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan, they are supposed to alternate the governorship, and in southern Kordofan, the governor right now is SPLM. But when I asked people about him they say he is weak; he has no power and the NCP is still running things. When I go to the Blue Nile state and the deputy governor right now is SPLM and the governor is NCP, people say the same thing: the SPLM deputy governor has no power, the NCP is still in control. I even hear stories like, “Yes, the SPLM people were officially given these various positions, but the NCP has actually placed shadow people over them or beside them and the shadow people are those who actually do the work and get the money for it.”

So whether these are true or just rumors that have gone around, it is what people believe. They do not believe that power sharing is working in Blue Nile and southern Kordofan. Now Abyei is a whole separate issue; in Abyei, it is clear that the CPA is being violated, because there has not been an Abyei administration set up and the Ngok Dinka clearly say that is proof that the NCP does not want peace in Abyei. They know there is oil there and they do not want to give it up. In my opinion, the trouble is going to be in the “three areas,” if there is going to be any trouble in terms of people not willing to be patient.

Q: And the boundary dispute is still a big issue?

A: Yes, very, very big.

Q: ...because the boundary commission was not able to resolve that issue?

A: They came up with a resolution, but it has not been accepted.

Q: One of the CPA’s provisions includes the preparations for elections and prior to that there is supposed to be a census. Is anything being done on a census?

A: All I know is the pilot census got postponed, and no money was released for it. I do not know what the reason was, but there was supposed to be money released for the pilot census, and it was not, and therefore, it has been postponed. The last that I heard was there is no new timeline. That is just for the pilot census, not the real census. In the pilot census, they are going out just to test the questionnaire and see what people react to and whether or not they are willing to answer.

Q: This is countrywide?

A: The pilot, as far as I know, I do not think so, but I am not involved day-to-day in that.

Q: Have there been any moves to prepare people for the elections that are coming up, in both the North and the South?

A: I do not think there is specific work yet; but many plans are under way for that. Also, NDI is starting a civic education radio program that will focus a lot on rights and freedoms and responsibilities of citizens and I am sure voting will be part of that.

Q: Are any preparations being made for the referendum?

A: I am sure there will be lots of preparations for that, but I think it is all in the planning stages at this point.

Q: Do you sense the government in the South has been able to get its capacity built up, more than it was before? That is a big issue, I understand.

A: It basically started from nothing, so it is a huge task. I am not qualified to answer that question, just because I do not get together with officials on a day-to-day basis.

Q: We did touch on this but in reference to security in the South, there have been reports that the northern government has been financing militias, maybe even the Lord's Resistance group, to perpetuate the strife in the southern area. Do you get any reports on that from the people that you talk to?

A: All the time. People absolutely, one hundred per cent believe it. I have no idea of the truth of it; when I was in Equatoria before the LRA talks began, people were one hundred per cent convinced that Khartoum Government was behind the LRA in southern Sudan. Also, with the recent events in Malakal with the other armed groups, people are convinced that it is also the Khartoum Government. In Abyei, there is the FSUM [title not identified], and the *shahama*, two other armed groups; the Ngok Dinka in Abyei are, again, one hundred per cent convinced that it is the government that is arming them.

Q: Let us turn to the Darfur situation. How has that affected the progress that you seem to imply is taking place?

A: I can only speak about what people say to me but, particularly in Abyei, which is the closest to Darfur of all the places I go, and people there see it as a very bad sign; the fact that the Khartoum government has not been willing to negotiate an end to that conflict means to Abyei people, "Okay, we are just like Darfur. They are not, in good faith, going to negotiate an end to this Abyei issue." So in that way, it leads to further pessimism among people, particularly in the "three areas." In the South as well, it makes them question the good faith of the northern government.

Q: Another perspective: what understanding do the people have of the role of the international community, in both peace arrangements and development?

A: Probably overstated. In some ways they see the international community as their savior and believe that they will be. Even though there is pessimism about the CPA, I will often ask, "What will make the CPA a success?" And they always say, "The international community; the SPLM and the international community." So they have faith in the SPLM and the international community to keep the CPA on track, make the northern elements of the government implement the agreement, and be faithful to the agreement. So they have faith that the international community will be able to do that.

But, what is interesting is that in Abyei, there are international monitors and people are very bitterly disappointed with what the international monitors have done or been able to do there, because people are being killed. The people's perceptions are that international monitors are supposed to be there to either stop the killing from happening, or if they cannot do that, arrest the people who do the killing. So a lot of what I got last time when I was in Abyei was, "Why are they here? If they are not going to protect civilians, then what is the worth of having them here?" Then the second part of it was, they also believe that the way the monitors were monitoring was unfair; they were only monitoring in southern Abyei, and they were being prevented by the Sudan Armed Forces from going to the northern parts of Abyei.

Q: Who are the monitors?

A: That is a good question. I do not know, exactly. There are some UN aspects to it but there may be another; there used to be something in southern Kordofan called the JIC, the Joint Integrated Command, that monitored that but I am not sure what mechanism is monitoring in Abyei. Part of it is the UN.

Q: And there is monitoring in the southern area?

A: There are some monitors, yes, but it is not as critical there, so people do not have as strong opinions as they do in Abyei.

Q: Is there some understanding about what the work of the international community is, apart from the monitoring process, in terms of development?

A: Yes, because during the war there was a lot of humanitarian assistance, so there is a lot of understanding. But again, the expectations are probably bigger than can be delivered. There is a lot of expectation that the international community will be involved in building schools and health clinics and those types of things, bore holes and probably continue food distribution. Yes, there are continued expectations on that.

Q: What about the NGO group. Are they there in some force?

A: In terms of the people's perception, they do not really differentiate between an NGO and the UN. It is all the "international community" to them.

Q: Do they express any views about what the international community should be doing?

A: Just more. It is understandable. It is a fairly desperate situation, because of the devastation of the war. There have been no schools for twenty years, no health care for twenty years.

Q: You are talking about a process of decades here, and the question of whether they can hold out for that length of time. Is there some other aspect we have not touched on that you want to focus on?

A: It looks like we touched on most things.

Q: You are going to do another round of focus groups soon?

A: I have just finished the “three areas” report. It will be out in a couple of weeks and then I will be going back in the field once that is released, in a couple of weeks, to start the next round, which will just be in the South.

Q: And is there a particular perspective for this next round?

A: In the next round I am actually going to try to have a lot of government involvement in it, Government of South Sudan (GOSS) involvement, because we have reached a point where they understand what people are thinking generally. Because communication is slow, opinion does not change that quickly, unless there is some catastrophic event like John Garang’s death. This next time, I would like to focus on topics, the government’s priorities, a lot about education, health, and those types of things.

Q: What has been their reception to your reports so far?

A: Very good. It is hard for them to hear some of the stuff because they are working very hard. It is hard for them to hear sometimes that people do not know the accomplishments, the achievements they have so far, but they understand there is a communication process they need to get underway. They have started that now. They created a new position after our last report to focus on this. They now have a communication advisor within the president’s office and they also have started a bunch of initiatives in the Ministry of Reclamation. But, by and large, they are very, very receptive to it and honestly the most common response is... I briefed John Garang and I briefed Salva Kiir – they are chuckling under their breath to themselves, because they know a lot of what is already in the report. They go around and they talk to people so the report sounds familiar to them.

Q: Looking back over the whole situation, what kind of lessons stand out? What has worked as a result of the CPA or what has not been working in the CPA? What kind of lessons would be useful for people to understand the peace process?

A: The main thing I would say, and again, this might be a bit unfair, because the death of John Garang changed everything, but in terms of what would need to be done better or corrected for future situations is a better understanding of expectations and the setting of

expectations along with a better system to communicate timelines. My honest feeling, after talking with literally thousands of people now, is that people would be patient if they understood the timeline for things. If someone just told them, look, it takes two years to get a road done; these types of things. Laying out timelines and communicating successes as you are going along that timeline. In terms of what I hear from people, those are the things that can be done better in the future.

Q: Certainly the roads and those things take a long time, but are there some smaller projects that small amounts of money can help in the interim? Is any of that being done?

A: I honestly do not know what is being done, but you are right, that is the thinking that should be taking place right now: what can we do in the meantime to make people a little bit more optimistic about this peace?

Q: But you are not aware of anything like that?

A: Not that I know of, but again, I am not in day-to-day contact with the government leaders.

Q: I am talking about the people themselves. Are they aware of any small activities that are being done to help them?

A: Not really, other than the occasional international intervention, those types of things.

Q: Any other lessons that stand out for you?

A: What has hit me, over and over, is the aspect of setting the expectations and the communication of it. That is really what has come out, over and over, in these groups.

Q: Of course, one of the big issues relates to the northern government. Do people have an understanding of that government, what it is doing or not doing?

A: That is another interesting point. There is absolutely no trust that the northern parts of the government will act in good faith. So if there was going to be a serious attempt to push for unity, that would be something that would have to be addressed with regular people. It would take a lot; a lot of communication and a lot of education and some very concrete signs on the part of the northern elements of the government for acting in good faith. Even little things; I remember when I was doing one of the focus groups people would say, over and over, “Well, if they were serious about this peace, Bashir would already have been in the South and he has not come to the South.”

So even little things like that. Now he eventually did come to the South, but apparently he did not handle it very well, from what I heard. But even little things like that could contribute to people’s belief that the North is acting in good faith, but there would have to be a number of those – and they would have to be concrete and real and not just a show – to change decades-old opinions that these are not trustworthy people.

Q: What is your assessment of the outcome of the elections or, more important, the referendum, based on your conversations with people?

A: There is no doubt on the referendum. One of the things I do is try to shake people from their beliefs, to see how strongly they hold these beliefs and if I ask them, “Okay, pretend the referendum was tomorrow. How would you vote?” “Absolutely, separation, absolutely.” And so I say, “Okay, well if Salva Kiir came to you tomorrow and said, ‘Look, I believe it would be best for us, for southern Sudan, to vote for unity.’ How would you vote?” “Separation! We do not care. We would kick him out.”

I would keep giving them these scenarios. There was not a scenario I could not come up with.... I even gave them the scenario “How about if you knew for sure that development would go faster if you remained united with the North, how would you vote?” And one man said, “You see these clothes I have on? If the North gave them to me I would take them off and walk naked because that is how much I do not want to be with them. I will vote for separation!” Nothing I said could shake them from that. So at least, at this point in time, based on my research, there is no doubt about the outcome of the referendum.

The elections are a different issue, but the one thing I can say about that is, though not surprising, there is no real differentiation yet in people’s minds between the GOSS and the SPLM. So when people refer to the government, a lot of times in our groups they will say the SPLM, when what they really mean is the Government of Southern Sudan, not the party, SPLM. There is very little differentiation yet, because there are no other parties that are strong enough to really have a presence, at this point in time. So it is going to be a difficult road for other parties to have their own presence; but there may be some, obviously one unfortunate, way to do that is to go as a tribal party, which could very quickly create a presence. But at least right now, no one even knows the name of another party.

Q: Do they have any understanding of the implications of going independent, in terms of what they are getting into?

A: No and they do not care. According to them, they are willing to sacrifice anything to be independent.