

Building Capacity Sustainably in Sudan

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It is a time of celebration in Southern Sudan. With the referendum on independence overwhelmingly approved, the people of the South feel a new sense of freedom and possibility. However, deciding to become an independent country and actually building that country are two very different things. This challenge is compounded by the continuing need for humanitarian assistance to returning refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). Balancing the immediate need for emergency relief with the longer-term necessity of sustainable development is something that international aid agencies must navigate with care. Episcopal Relief & Development's long-standing partnership with the Episcopal Church of Sudan (ECS) allows it to work along both tracks, while building local capacity and ensuring lasting results.

The faith communities of Sudan, particularly the churches of the South, have been key advocates for a just and sustainable peace as set forth in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The ECS, the South's fastest-growing faith community, has played a catalytic role in the peace process, helping to shape public opinion and creating space for people to learn about and discuss the transition to self-rule. Church leaders have used their pulpits to educate parishioners about the referendum, and mobile civic education workshops have made an effort to reach even the most rural communities with information on how and where to vote.

Additionally, and perhaps even more importantly, the Church provides a channel for people's opinions and concerns to reach key decision makers in government and civil society. In the peace process, this has helped communities to become true stakeholders in work of peace-making, reconciliation and nation-building, from the grassroots to the highest levels. The Most Rev. Daniel Deng Bul, Archbishop of the ECS, has been particularly active in articulating the concerns of his people and their vision for the future, leading high-level delegations to the office of the UN Secretary General and governments of the US and UK.

In relief and development work, the Church's ability to connect with, listen to and represent the community has produced initiatives that respond to local needs and work through local structures to serve the people who live there. The ECS is organized in 30 dioceses that cover the country, with bishops, priests, lay leaders, development workers and women's and youth groups present in even the most remote communities. With its long history of providing health and education services, even in refugee and IDP camps outside the country, the ECS has earned the trust and respect of both church members and the general public, proving that it is genuinely invested in the life and health of the community.

Because of its widespread community presence, its ability to represent concerns and organize action and its demonstrated capability as a partner in locally-led development programs, the ECS has also been recognized by the Government of Southern Sudan as a vital partner in nation-building. During this time of transition, while government structures are solidifying and the economy is stabilizing, the Church is able to offer social services and use its own experience and infrastructure to provide leadership at community, regional, national and international levels. In fact, in the absence of a mature, multi-party political system, key faith actors like the ECS may be uniquely positioned to assist in the development of the Southern Sudanese state.

Unfortunately, it is not always easy to turn great potential into actual results.

The reality in Southern Sudan is still one of chaos and uncertainty. Infrastructure is lacking, logistics are challenging, and the economy is far from stable. There is still legitimate need for emergency aid and service delivery, and there are a number of excellent organizations working to meet that need. But in our rush to alleviate suffering as soon as we can, we also need to be careful not to undermine the country's long-term development. Promoting sustainable development and building local capacity are cornerstones of any responsible development strategy, but building local capacity in a sustainable way is something that takes much more time and patience than many current strategies allow.

Episcopal Relief & Development has been working in partnership with the ECS and its relief and development arm, SUDRA (the Sudanese Development and Relief Agency), both to meet the basic needs of returning refugees and to strengthen the Church for the long process of nation-building. The Church has great potential to bring programs to scale, but its capacity is still developing, so Episcopal Relief & Development is committed to working with its Sudanese partners from this starting point. Our program goals and timelines reflect a focus on building competencies in our partner institutions, trading off fast service delivery for a slower but sustained approach. Even though the beginning of the program may seem disorganized or uncertain compared to the operation of a seasoned international NGO with minimal Sudanese involvement, we are confident that the end point is much stronger. Because the ECS is so much a part of civil society, and because Episcopal Relief & Development's relationship with the Church is long-term, the result of the work done in partnership between the two entities is much more likely to endure.

However, this work does not happen in a vacuum, and there is a great deal of competition for the best-qualified development workers. Market salaries for health, development and management professionals are extremely high because demand is huge and supply, as yet, is quite small. One effect of this imbalance is that local organizations risk becoming over-dependent on short-term development funding for budgetary support. Local NGOs may be able to build salary costs for development workers into proposals, only to find that they cannot meet their core operating costs without external funding. The lifespan of an organization in this situation would be linked to the priorities and attention spans of outside agencies, and without local investment and grassroots support, it would be unlikely to survive.

In order to correct the imbalance between the necessity for and availability of qualified workers, some institutions invest in training and education so that community members can fill needed positions. Unfortunately, there is always the risk that the best and brightest will then leave to seek higher salaries elsewhere, sometimes outside the country. The most highly qualified development workers may find positions with large international NGOs working in the area, but when an agency leaves at the end of its program cycle, it often happens that the local workers leave, too. Opening opportunities to build local capacity is a positive thing, but the accompanying work of strengthening local institutions is necessary so that there are good jobs to combat "brain drain" and keep people engaged in their communities.

The solution to these problems - increasing labor supply, making it possible for skilled workers to stay in their communities and strengthening local community structures - involves investment not just in a few development workers, but in entire community systems. In the Church's case, it means basing operations on what the community is able to support, and pouring effort into community development measures that would, in turn, also help the Church grow. Building

management capacity and increasing stewardship within the Church - not as a time-limited side project, but as a core activity - could greatly improve retention of skilled workers and benefit the community at large. This method of community development is not quick to accomplish, and it may not be within the scope of many international organizations to support, but the quality of the results is well worth the effort.

Relief and development are often seen in a balance, between short-term aid that fills a gap and long-term projects that transform and empower communities. Yet in Sudan, for Episcopal Relief & Development and its local partners, the two worked in synergy to benefit both the Church and those in need. The need for immediate relief services in Sudan motivated the ECS and SUDRA to respond, and their efforts provided excellent opportunities for community members to learn skills and become experts in community-based relief and development work. Dealing with the transition to independence and working to provide a safe welcome to returning refugees has helped the Church grow stronger and more capable as an institution. Episcopal Relief & Development will remain a committed partner through this next phase of growth, for both the Church and the people of Southern Sudan.