

## Why Sudan's peace agreements fail

Monday 12 November 2012

By Anne Bartlett

November 11, 2012 - Einstein once quipped that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Given this point, one might suggest that recent agreements on borders, security and peace in Sudan have an element of the insane about them. Such agreements have not only replicated past mistakes, but have done so in the full knowledge that they will antagonize many people and may even generate new conflicts. Nevertheless these peace agreements continue on regardless, even though they have no real chance of creating peace. The question is why?

A common response is that people are suffering and that something needs to be done right now, even if the outcome is imperfect. While it is hard to disagree with this sentiment, it is equally heartbreaking to watch conflicts go on for years and years because poorly crafted agreements fail to get at the underlying dynamics that cause the conflict in the first place. "Quick", in this respect, is neither better, nor sustainable over the long term. And yet the international community is gripped with a bad case of "never mind the conflict, here's a peace agreement", in which there is an assumption that writing something, ... in fact, anything, will magically make the problem go away.

At the core of the issue is impatience with the process by which peace is created and the need for short-term, politically expedient solutions. More often than not, the international community rolls out its stock approach to conflict resolution, which typically takes the form of wheeling on a neutral international mediator (who may or may not have credibility); utilizing the resources of host nation (that may or may not have underhand links to the Sudanese regime); bringing together a set of representatives from the political or military classes (who may or may not have legitimacy in the eyes of the people), and then cranking out a bland, meaningless resolution. Those involved are then asked to convince their communities to implement the un-implementable and are left to deal with the inevitable chaos that breaks out on the ground. While the politicians and leaders face the heat from their constituencies, the international community walks away with a foreign policy coup, a few cheery disingenuous handshakes and an overall sense of a "job well done".

But the reality is that the job is nowhere near to being done, because implementation is 90% of the story. Even for those lacking in Einstein's intellectual capabilities, it doesn't take much effort to figure out that these kinds of peace agreements will soon hit the ground with a loud and heavy thud once they leave the negotiating table. The main reason for this is that they are usually top-down in nature and have no detailed substance that can be brought to bear in the process of conflict transformation and implementation over the long term. Instead, agreements are typically full of vague and meaningless drivel and lack even the most rudimentary signposts to direct future action. The net result is that those who are dishonest sign on to such agreements with an air of undisguised glee, safe in the knowledge that nothing will happen, while those who really want something to happen, have to try to contain their growing feelings of frustration and resentment.

It is high time for another conversation about what might work in Sudan, and in the interests of starting this, here are a few thoughts: As a start there must be dual directionality in any peace process. Put simply, this means that the process must run two ways - from the ground up and from the negotiating table down. It is not enough to impose solutions crafted at a negotiating table on those who are living at the sharp end of the violence, without detailed local knowledge about the practices of the people concerned. This means that before anyone even sits at any table to negotiate, a detailed, fieldwork type of study by people who actually know something about the community should be undertaken which includes information about local culture, customary practice and ritual, key stakeholders and how daily lives have evolved over time. In communities where an oral tradition exists and where there are cultural practices that involve might Pagan, Christian or Islamic layers, it is vital to recognize that time spent with local people will uncover more than what we currently know from colonial administrators. This is especially the case around land issues, where practices, meanings and the importance of land to local people may be known, but not recorded anywhere. There are good examples of careful, detailed studies - such as the work of the boundaries commission - but more often than not, consultations by international mediators take the form of flying visits for a few hours or days, and the result, as we all know, is half the story rather than the full picture. There are many examples of this approach in South Sudan, the Nuba Mountains and Darfur that have usually exacerbated the problem rather than resolving it.

Failing to gather a full and comprehensive picture of what is going on leads to a number of dangerous outcomes. For a start, local people feel that they are not being listened to and this drives seething resentment on the ground. Resentment that is not managed at the agreement stage will simply sow the seeds for violence later, and will derail the possibility that conflict might be transformed over the long term. Moreover, the "quick and dirty" approach of listening to only a few chosen people may skew an understanding of who has legitimacy on the ground. The net result of all of this is that suit-wearing government stooges have a nasty habit of showing up at negotiations and being taken seriously. These people, who speak good English, talk the talk and look the part, are, of course, convenient to the West, but they do untold damage to the Sudan(s) over the

long term. This includes the destruction of older systems of legitimacy and power, the alienation of traditional leaders who the people respect, and the empowerment of peripheral people who have no chance of creating peace on the ground. As a result, this creates more tension, more fractures in the social landscape and sets up hostilities that could have been avoided with a little more thought and care. Darfur is a classic case in point here, and yet the international community continues to support the Doha process, when it clearly shouldn't do so.

An approach that brings ground-up and top-down elements of conflict resolution together is now desperately needed, so that what goes on at the negotiating table can be linked to meaningful conflict transformation on the ground. Further, such detailed reports must link conflict transformation into actual ritual and practice on the ground, so that local people can identify with the recommendations that are made and understand how they work to implement this in their own lives. For responsible leaders who want peace and care about a sustainable shared future, support is desperately needed so that there can be some substance to future peace talks. We are now at a critical juncture where these reports are either produced or we run the risk of losing the information forever. This is especially important when the Government of Sudan is maliciously stirring up trouble in the border areas between groups in Abyei and in the 14 mile area, and where the likes of Tigani Seisi and the war criminal Ahmed Haroun are forever changing the contours of life in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains with demographic re-engineering, redistricting and land contouring.

Peace in Sudan is not a matter of simple conflict resolution formulas: it is a matter of careful, tailor-made analyses that understand the social, economic and political dynamics at play. Now is the time for the international community to step up and support the people of Sudan to do this work before it is too late. The current strategy of providing expedient "peace-deals" and then humanitarian aid when it all goes wrong is a recipe for disaster. Not only is this destabilizing the Sudan(s) and the region, but it is also creating extremely angry citizens and ungovernable spaces in which future hostilities will start. The time has now come for a re-moralization of diplomacy and a more thoughtful approach to conflict resolution that will generate new imprints for change and a foundation on which the future of Sudan can be rebuilt. Let us hope that this re-building can finally reflect an image based on the kinds of peace and harmony that Sudanese citizens need, want and so desperately deserve.

*Dr. Anne Bartlett is a Professor of Sociology and Director of the Graduate Program in International Studies at the University of San Francisco. She may be reached at [albartlett@usfca.edu](mailto:albartlett@usfca.edu)*