



Lessons for A System Under Pressure

*What ten years of conflict sensitivity work tells us about the future of aid
in South Sudan*

March 2026

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Acknowledgments

The authors would like to gratefully acknowledge the generous contributions of wisdom and insight from the communities in Bentiu, Rubkona and Kapoeta, and from the experiences of many current and former aid workers, analysts and donors who have worked in South Sudan. We have been lucky enough to have had the opportunity to work on issues related to peace and conflict in South Sudan for many years, and so also want to thank the many communities and individuals who have shared lessons along the way. We hope that this research reflects the care, the commitment, and the radical potential for transformation within the aid system that we believe is necessary for aid to break old patterns and build new ones that better respond to the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Acronyms

CPA – Comprehensive Peace Agreement

CSRF – Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility

DFID – Department for International Development

FCDO – Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

INGO – International Non-governmental Organisation

IPC – Integrated Food Security Phase Classification

NNGO – National Non-governmental Organisation

OCHA – Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid

PFPRR – Partnership for Peacebuilding, Resilience and Recover

R-ARCSS – Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan

RRC – Relief and Rehabilitation Commission

SPLM/A – Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement/Army

UN – United Nations

WFP – World Food Programme

Executive Summary

The Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) turns ten at a moment when the aid sector in South Sudan is facing unprecedented challenges to its funding, principles, credibility and vision. These challenges necessitate critical thinking and bold action at a time when resources and options are critically low. As of writing, many aid organisations in South Sudan have seen severe cuts in staffing, some have closed, and others are likely to withdraw in the coming months.

This paper argues that in this moment, when many in the aid sector are focused on survival and business continuity, radical changes are possible for transformation and reinvention of the aid sector. Such changes are needed to address three sets of critical challenges:

1. Aid's interaction with power, government, and governance;
2. Aid's interaction with society, inclusion, and identity;
3. Aid's horizon – Addressing symptoms but not root causes.

Whilst there are many examples of positive deviance where, for periods of time, organisations or groups of actors have been able to engage with these challenges in effective ways, these successes have often been short-lived, subject to poor institutional memory, turnover, donor changes in priorities, or swings in security dynamics. These three challenges have therefore been observed for decades in South Sudan, perpetuated by the complex system of how the aid sector is oriented, funded, and overseen.

Change, therefore, must be led by systems analysis, looking for leverage points within the system where attitudes and behaviours can meaningfully be influenced. We have adapted a systems analysis framework for analysing these leverage points, and identified four key areas where we believe that meaningful changes can be motivated:

- ❖ **Get the goals right and align the incentives.** Aid's ostensible goals are too often overshadowed by goals around competitive funding and survival. But more importantly, donor priorities and aid's analysis often do not reflect the structural nature of conflict and fragility that drives vulnerability and conflict over time. A focus on short-term needs, without understanding how responding to those needs may perpetuate conflict risks locking aid into decades of reactive programming.
- ❖ **Work 'with' and not 'for'.** Despite ever-louder demands that communities lead and own the solutions to their humanitarian, development and peacebuilding needs, the aid system's power structure remains totally imbalanced. Instead of 'delivering' or 'implementing', international assistance could focus on supporting, facilitating, or enabling communities to solve their own problems, and to demand accountability from both the aid system and the government.
- ❖ **Focus on building enabling infrastructure and removing barriers.** In line with the above, international aid should consider how it can provide public goods that are not zero-sum, one-off forms of assistance, but that enable communities to creatively meet their own needs and build their own resilience.
- ❖ **Go beyond measures of success that count numbers of people reached.** Reductive measures of success can undermine strategic thinking, push focus on 'easy-to-reach' areas, and create perverse incentives to compromise principles. Measures of success that promote holistic responses to structural sources of conflict are needed to motivate meaningful aid that doesn't just respond to need today but helps reduce it going forward.

Introduction

Background

In August 2014, a group of international donors met in Juba to discuss an emerging plan, one that was intended to address a failure of the international aid system that they funded and oversaw. Nine months earlier, South Sudan's governing coalition had splintered overnight and civil war spread rapidly across the country. While tensions had been apparent in the weeks leading up to the schism, and despite dark warnings from many South Sudanese observers, the donors had not understood the underlying issues, or their significance to the fragile unity of the new country.¹ In the months that followed the outbreak of war, donors and aid actors were criticised for writing technocratic prescriptions to state-building that ignored complex political, social and economic conflicts below the surface.

By the time of the 2014 meeting, donors in South Sudan were under pressure from their headquarters to respond to this criticism. Plans were developed for a facility to support them in analysis, principles, and skills to better understand the conflict dynamics in South Sudan and meaningfully act on that analysis. In 2016 the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) opened its doors, originally intended as a support facility for the donors primarily. Ten years later, the mandate of the CSRF has broadened considerably to encompass support to all actors within the aid system and to include work on convening and collective action, but the intention of the endeavour remains roughly the same. The CSRF supports humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work in South Sudan to be more contextually-aware and better able to avoid contributing to conflict, instead – when possible – helping to breaking the cycle of violence.

The CSRF's unusual position within the South Sudan aid ecosystem, as a public good that does not compete for funding, has enabled trusted relations across the sector. Over the past ten years, the facility has participated in both quiet, discreet discussions addressing challenging issues, as well as publicly raising dilemmas that many would rather not discuss. The facility approaches conflict sensitivity not as a compliance exercise but as a space of critical inquiry, principled analysis, and transformation. This means focusing on questions of power, systems and principles, rather than performative approaches that give the outward appearance of conflict sensitivity without leading to meaningful changes.

Ten Years of Lessons: Goals, Methodology, Limitations

This paper reflects on lessons that have been, or that should have been learned over the past ten years of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work² in South Sudan. It takes a step back from the day-to-day crisis response that dominates the work of many aid organisations to consider the cumulative and holistic interaction between internationally-funded assistance programmes and South Sudan's prospects for peace and prosperity, particularly in the context of the current challenges facing the global aid sector. This analysis is derived from 37 interviews and 7 focus group discussions held between January and February 2026 with current and past international and national aid actors, donors, analysts, observers and South Sudanese communities receiving assistance. Focus groups and key informant interviews were held

¹ "2014 was a moment of total despair, a bottomless pit; nobody understood what was going on. But that acknowledgement was the right start point." Interview with senior aid actor. 11 February 2026.

² For simplicity, we will refer to humanitarian, development and peacebuilding initiatives collectively as 'aid.'

Rubkona and Bentiu in Unity State and Kapoeta in Eastern Equatoria in January 2026 to gather insights and evidence from aid actors and community groups interfacing with the new reality of aid cuts. A literature review, including a heavy focus on grey literature, has been included to better understand nascent and ongoing shifts in the aid sector. The research also draws on personal experiences from the authors implementing peacebuilding and conflict mitigation programmes and setting up the CSRF as its first director from 2016-2019.

Doing this analysis at a moment of crisis within the aid sector presents both challenges and opportunities in determining which lessons are most relevant or offer the greatest scope for learning and action. In the current context, two factors may impede adaptation. First is the ongoing uncertainty relating to the direction the global aid sector is heading. It is in a moment of profound disruption, with countervailing forces seeking to shape its direction. Second, many of the analytical capacities needed to thoughtfully navigate this chaotic context have already been jettisoned due to budget cuts and political reorientation. However, moments of crisis may offer opportunities and motivation for undertaking difficult changes that are not possible during normal times.

We seek to assess the lessons from the perspective of systems analysis, recognising that the actions of individuals and organisations across the aid sector, as well as across South Sudan, are strongly influenced by systemic forces, including information flows, incentives and constraints, governing rules, principles, and the paradigm itself. We will explore the relevance of these systemic lessons from South Sudan to global aid approaches.

Context: Aid, Politics, and Society Collide in South Sudan

Large-scale aid efforts have been undertaken in what is now South Sudan for more than 40 years with varying levels of intentionality around aid's interaction with politics and power. At the national level, countries like the United States initially backed Khartoum against the Marxist-aligned Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) with hundreds of millions of dollars of military and food aid.³ As the Cold War ended, many western donors began to nominally endorse the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, but in practice began to more explicitly back the southern rebels. During the implementation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), diplomats and donors marshalled behind the agreement, prodding progress when it became stuck, and constructing aid packages to help transition the armed rebels to a democratic government. At the same time, billions of dollars in oil revenues began to arrive in Juba, as provided for under the CPA. The revenues did not, however, find their way into the national budget, instead filtering through patronage networks and private accounts.⁴

As the country spiralled into civil war in December 2013, and aid actors struggled to make sense of what they hadn't seen coming, a new season of mistrust between the government and the international aid

³ Human Rights Watch. *Global Trade, Local Impact: Arms Transfers to all Sides in the Civil War in Sudan*. 1998.

⁴ [OHCHR estimates](#) that \$25 billion has been received in oil exports and oil-backed loans between 2011-2024, and that nearly all of it has been lost to corruption.

community began.⁵ Aid programmes were adapted to try to prevent officials at national, state or local levels from benefiting from international assistance, or from leveraging such assistance for either military or political benefit. The government was increasingly seen as predatory, violent, and autocratic and, particularly at the national level, viewed as ‘far from the people’ and traditional lines of accountability.⁶

The Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed in 2018, opened the door for increased international optimism and support, stemming from “a desire to believe in the peace agreement. It was almost a shift back to post-CPA programming, with programmes for peace and longer-term programmes shifting to development.”⁷ Neither the CPA nor the 2018 peace agreement challenged the predatory underpinnings of South Sudan’s power structures; “Rather than constraining predatory rule, these agreements reconfigured and legitimised it under the guise of state building.”⁸ Since then, ongoing military activity across the country, consolidation of the government’s control of former opposition territories, and the imprisonment of the First Vice President illustrate a strategy of control through hegemony against a backdrop of violent succession politics. As of writing, the Tumann Peace Initiative, seeking to support dialogue amongst all of South Sudan’s political and military factions, seems to follow what is now a familiar pattern of elite negotiations over resources and power, with formal commitments to inclusion, but no sign of the political will needed to meaningfully take them forward.

Looking Back: Aid’s footprints across South Sudan’s history

This exercise is taking place at a moment when aid actors and leaders in South Sudan are scrambling to make sense of a new reality where the international aid paradigm (and industry) face immense, perhaps existential, challenges. The reverberations are already felt along the width and breadth of the sector, but the ultimate nature of the changes remain to be seen – and may be influenceable.

This section seeks to identify areas where two conditions apply:

1. Aid’s footprints across the South Sudan landscape have had **unintended impacts with consequences** for the country’s potential for peace and prosperity, and
2. **Adaptation is critically necessary** for aid’s integrity and effectiveness going forward.

Three areas fitting these criteria will be described in turn below. In subsequent sections they will be assessed

Aid’s Footprints, Peace and Conflict

Three areas where aid interacts with the potential for peace or conflict, and where adaptation is necessary.

1. Aid’s interaction with power:
Empowering government but not governance.
2. Aid’s interaction with society: Crossing lines we cannot see.
3. Addressing symptoms instead of root causes.

⁵ Maxwell, Dan and Martina Santschi. *From post-conflict recovery and state building to a renewed humanitarian emergency: A brief reflection on South Sudan*. August 2014. <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/post-conflict-recovery-and-state-building-renewed-humanitarian-emergency-brief-0>

⁶ Interview with South Sudanese academic. 12 February 2026.

⁷ Interview with international academic. 6 February 2026

⁸ Benson, Matthew Sterling. *Predatory Peace: Fiscal Fragmentation and Coercive Statebuilding in South Sudan and Beyond*. Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding. 2025.

through the lens of systems analysis and examined for potential recommendations for the aid sector going forward, in whatever form that may take.

1. Aid's interaction with power: Empowering government, but not governance

The relationship between citizen and state in South Sudan is not driven by a social contract relating to service provision and accountability, but instead by violent resource extraction, coercion and militarised control. Security provision at the local level, seen as the mandate and responsibility of county commissioners, serves the interests of government and business primarily, rather than the interests of the community. According to interviews in Kapoeta, for example, security threats to local gold mining evoke an immediate and effective security response, but threats to the community are ignored.⁹ Local government authorities are expected to control the flow of resources and information, and to deploy sufficient security to ensure this flow serves the interests of the state.¹⁰ Official accountability mechanisms that were intended to act as checks on local authorities have not been implemented. The first mechanism is elections, but these have never been held for county commissioners (instead they continue to be unconstitutionally appointed by presidential decree). Second, the 2009 Local Government Act provides for Local Legislative Councils (county councillors), comprising 35 community members who meet quarterly to fulfil a number of responsibilities, including supervision and oversight of the Executive Council, including the County Commissioner.¹¹ Only a few councils are reported to have been set up around independence, and we have not seen any evidence of functioning councils today. Despite the lack of official accountability mechanisms, communities are able to influence some commissioners, some of the time, in large part due to a binding web of relationships, and being in close enough proximity to leverage them.¹² Social structures like clans, age sets, sections, armed youth, churches, and cattle camps are still very important for informal governance, politics access to natural resources, mutual aid, and security.

Traditional authorities, or chiefs, traditionally selected by the communities or inherited, are in some contexts increasingly seen as being brought into the same top-down system of control; more accountable to the state structure than to their communities.¹³ Block leaders within IDP camps are also said to be becoming less transparent, less accountable to those living in their block.¹⁴ According to an interview in Bentiu, "Block leaders even exist in town. And it's taken on a life of its own. They are more likely to be security agents, surveilling the community, connected to government. NGOs can't do work without them. Going forward, the block leaders will be the flagbearers in elections."¹⁵ Discussions in Bentiu reinforced the idea that lack of diversity within aid's interlocutors undermines transparency. "There are female

⁹ Interviews in Kapoeta. January 2026.

¹⁰ Interviews in Kapoeta report that local authorities prohibit sharing of conflict or security related information among civil actors, instead requiring it to be reported to the local government, which then shares what it chooses.

¹¹ Government of South Sudan. *Local Government Act, South Sudan*. 2009. Pg. 17.

¹² Reported example of a well-connected commissioner in Bor that was replaced under pressure from the community for selling a vegetable market that belonged to a women's group. Interview 5 February 2026.

¹³ Noting that the experience varies community-to-community, and that it can be further complicated by parallel administrative units in areas where both IO and IG seek to control people and resources.

¹⁴ "If you could go to the block leaders' houses, they have everything and they are getting married every year. Where do they get the resources?" Interview in Bentiu. January 2026.

¹⁵ Interview with South Sudanese aid worker in Bentiu. January 2026.

leaders who were to work with the male block leaders but were sidelined. These were the very members whom the organisations could have used because women are always caring and know everyone.”¹⁶

Donor attempts to prevent government officials from benefiting from aid after 2014, and to a lesser degree at subsequent points, focused on big-picture budget lines like infrastructure and equipment, and quibbled more confusingly around meals or per diems provided at workshops. Attempts to meaningfully shift power dynamics and accountability at the local level were however generally anaemic and technical in approach, focusing on community consultations and meetings, often performative. Meanwhile, the approaches that continue to be used to deliver aid empower local authorities, sometimes in unaccountable ways:

- **Aid targeting methodologies** often rely on (or acquiesce to) local authorities and chiefs to devise beneficiary lists. Interviews suggest that authorities are often particularly insistent on deciding who receives food or cash programming but intervene less when it comes to selecting participants for trainings. In cases, however, where needs are high and supplies are low, some chiefs prefer not to be involved in targeting, as the pressure from the community can be high.¹⁷
- **Aid diversion** is enabled by a lack of transparency around aid’s goals, budgets, and mechanisms. A community’s ability to hold an official to account, already slim, becomes impossible when they are not aware of what has been provided, or why.¹⁸
- **Legitimacy from presence.** Not only the provision of goods and services, but even the presence of aid actors can bring legitimacy to local government, who often claim to have brought the aid.¹⁹ A senior SPLM/A official said in 2000, “Our people now feel that they belong to a government, and that is all because of aid. They think that the SPLM government is responsible for the coming of aid, and in a way we are responsible for it.”²⁰ Aid also provides very potent symbols of power in rural areas, where their vehicles, fuel, jobs, infrastructure and internet are invaluable resources that will normally far exceed what local administrations can command. Further, the symbolic presence of local government at projects conveys responsibility. In areas where aid presence has decreased over the past year, local government offices are reported to be frequently closed.²¹
- **Legitimacy from internationally-backed peace agreements.** At the national level, the pursuit of and signing of peace agreements bestows reputational and fiduciary capital that the government and its rivals can use to consolidate positions, strengthen systems of economic and political control, and postpone or avoid pressures to reform. The written agreements often contain

¹⁶ Focus Group Discussion, Bentiu IDP Camp. January 2026.

¹⁷ Santschi, Martina et al. *Caught between two cultures: When aid in South Sudan is pulled between local norms and western systems.* CSRF. 2017.

¹⁸ CSRF. *Conflict Sensitivity and Food Aid in Northern Bahr el Ghazal.* CSRF. 2017.

¹⁹ The Commissioner of Kapoeta North was removed at the same time as USAID partners withdrew from the area; the community has widely interpreted this as evidence of his political connections.

²⁰ Duffield et al. *Sudan: Unintended Consequences of Humanitarian Assistance – Field Evaluation Study.* Dublin: The University of Dublin, Trinity College. 2000.

²¹ Interviews in Bentiu, Rubkona and Kapoeta in January 2026. Note, this should not be construed as meaning that the county’s role in security management has decreased.

commitments to transforming the political and economic systems that sustain the predatory, autocratic system, but these have yet to be taken forward with integrity.²²

- **Relief from the burden of providing services.** While difficult to prove, a number of interviews propose that the government of South Sudan might have provided social services, including education and health, if the aid had not done so. This assumption of responsibility is promoted strongly by many South Sudanese, notably Ambassador Frances Mading Deng, who see the current crisis of foreign aid as an opportunity for the government to step into the gap.²³ This however, ignores contexts in which the government has deliberately prevented the flow of aid to hostile areas as part of a counter-insurgency strategy.²⁴

Some of the above ‘sins of commission’ may be unavoidable at times within a context of competing principles and priorities. However, it is the sin of omission that perhaps defines the legacy of the footprints of aid through the space of power and governance. While use of gatekeepers, local authorities and power structures to direct aid within a militarised society was understood as following the humanitarian imperative (implicitly valued over the principle of independence), countervailing efforts to support community power over aid and over local authorities were weak by comparison. Despite rhetoric of empowering communities and local organisations, they were too often left out of planning, decision-making, information systems, and resource management. Efforts that did occur centred on periodic, formulaic, often performative consultations. They tend not to draw upon or support the local systems that communities traditionally use to promote accountability.²⁵

2. Aid’s interactions with society: Crossing lines we cannot see

In every society there are invisible lines that connect and divide. For even those within that society, these lines come into focus and disappear over time, both because they are changing and due to shifts in our own perceptions. When working in other societies, these lines are more difficult to see, and when working in complex, conflict-affected contexts, these lines become trip wires of incredible importance. Examples abound within South Sudan of aid actors that worked with good intentions, oblivious to the invisible lines around them – from the macro-level, as in December 2013 to the most micro-level as gender dynamics within a home are affected by targeting criteria and delivery approaches. The lines become clearer the closer one is to the context, but generally at the expense of one’s neutrality. Once one is close enough to discern the near total, one is also part of the context and influenced by the web of surrounding connections.

In South Sudan, aid actors have encountered these lines, knowingly or not, across multiple dimensions. Some recurrent themes as we examine aid’s footprints include:

²² Benson, Matthew Sterling. *Predatory Peace: Fiscal Fragmentation and Coercive Statebuilding in South Sudan and Beyond*. Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding. 2025.

²³ Deng, Frances Mading. *A call for an end to dependency: A piece of advice from an elder*. Atar Network, English Issue 27. October 2025.

²⁴ Craze, Joshua. *Displacement, Access and Conflict in South Sudan: A Longitudinal Perspective*. CSRF. 2018.

²⁵ Interview with international aid actor. 11 February 2026.

- **Gender.** Gender differences are often easily perceived, but the fluidity of gender norms and dynamics are often unanticipated, obscured, over-simplified, or politicised. In South Sudan, and in contrast to the other categories presented below, shifting gender norms and protections are often explicitly a goal of aid programmes. In some areas, communities perceive that gender norms have been influenced by aid programmes, with diverse and sometimes unpredictable implications for the quality of aid, conflict within the home, and society more broadly.²⁶
- **Ethnicity or Clan.** Kinship is not only connection; it is also survival and professional network. While the concept of ‘nepotism’ as a negative societal force does exist in South Sudan, there are also lines of accountability and reciprocity that bind families. These often put South Sudanese aid workers in difficult situations, caught between two sets of normative principles.²⁷
- **Political Affiliation.** The logic of division of spoils, rather than transformation of the system, is transmitted through the dozens of peace agreements that have been signed in South Sudan over the past 50 years. A key component of this carving of the cake is scrupulous attention to where the pieces of the cake go, and if they adequately reflect the competing visions of ascendant power. Many South Sudanese observers keep a running mental tally of where aid goes, geographically, as a litmus test for political bias of donors.²⁸
- **Rural vs. Urban.** Rural-urban dynamics are not strictly geographical or livelihood questions in South Sudan. They also reflect competing paradigms of authority and culture. In South Sudan ‘*hakuma*,’ Arabic for government, reflects a wide range of societal forces; military, bureaucracy, aid, schools, and administration – these are generally associated with towns.²⁹ They also reflect spaces where predatory systems of governance operate. Homelands, on the other hand, reflect spaces free of such influences, where traditional, cultural norms still predominate. Aid’s decisions of where to operate and what to support interact with these spaces of contestation.

Aid criteria for targeting are informed by global standards. At times they reflect robust data and at times they follow foreign normative standards about what constitutes vulnerability. Sometimes these overlap with South Sudan norms, and sometimes they do not.³⁰ However, they always interact with the dimensions described above. A respect for local knowledge and ownership of aid’s goals is necessary for impact to be amplified by local dynamics, rather than constrained by it.

3. Addressing symptoms instead of root causes

The international sector has increasingly recognised that humanitarian, developmental and peacebuilding dynamics within any context are interconnected and, despite siloes in the three fields in terms of ways of working and objectives, holistic approaches are needed. But this has not gone far enough in terms of identifying and addressing the long-term fragilities and root causes of violence that entrench vulnerability

²⁶ In Kapoeta, focus group discussions noted significant shifts in gender norms, including the election of a female chief and greater inclusion of women in community discussions. These shifts were not noted in the Bentiu/Rubkona focus group discussions. January 2026.

²⁷ Santschi, Martina et al. *Caught between two cultures: When aid in South Sudan is pulled between local norms and western systems*. CSRF. 2017.

²⁸ Focus group discussion, Kapoeta. January 2026.

²⁹ Leonard, Cherry. *Liberation or Capture: Youth in between ‘Hakuma’ and home during civil war and its aftermath in Southern Sudan*. African Affairs. 2007.

³⁰ Harrigan, Simon. *Southern Sudan Vulnerability Study*. Save the Children. 1998.

over time in South Sudan. In the absence of such analysis and direction, decades of short-term responses to incessant crises have missed opportunities to break the cycles of violence and may further entrench such cycles. The reactive approach helps to contain the human cost of a violent system for a limited period of time but does nothing to change the system.

While these dynamics have been studied and analysed by the CSRF and others for many years, four aspects of aid's approach that shape these dynamics emerged during this research period.

Analysis. Holistic, meaningful action depends on nuanced understanding of the context, of structural causes of conflict (as they vary across the country from location to location), and an ability to assimilate new factors and dynamics as they emerge. Most of the necessary knowledge already rests within the communities that are themselves affected (though outside perspectives are important to triangulate perceptions, challenge old narratives or biases, and connect data points). The analysis must go beyond security-related data to focus on invisible violence and the nature of power within and between groups.

Ownership and Relevance. Despite increasing rhetoric about the importance of local leadership and ownership of aid programmes, the aid infrastructure still struggles to act meaningfully on this. These issues have been explored in detail, including the costs, the opportunities and the barriers.³¹ The barriers are deeply embedded in the models that the aid system currently uses.

Timeframes and Horizons. While there is much focus, particularly from implementing agencies, on the challenges associated with short-term funding, less attention is given to the question of aid's horizon. This is not an argument for detailed, multi-year planning that ties hands or limits future options. It is an argument for processes that focus on the generational nature of change that is needed for South Sudan's prospects for peace and prosperity and are able to plan and work across longer timeframes, using adaptive models that encourage learning, innovation, piloting and replicating over time. Too often in the current model, lessons are lost and failures are replicated for want of a longer-term horizon of analysis, planning and learning.³²

Measures of Success. The final factor shaping the impact of aid's footprints in South Sudan that we explore in this paper relates to how success is defined or measured. The sector implicitly follows a growth model, where actors are often recognised by the size and growth of their portfolios and by their ability to spend budgets within specific time frames. The second type of measures of success are easily quantifiable targets. For the humanitarian sector this often means the number of people reached, while for development actors it might mean infrastructure such as boreholes or schools, or events such as trainings. When faced with impossibly complex crises and dilemmas or the need for more difficult investments around justice, peacebuilding, and accountability, the simplicity of these metrics is seductive, but unhelpful. It encourages decision-makers to weigh first and foremost simple measures of quantity and reportable numbers, rather than long-term implications of actions, externalities, or other trade-offs.

³¹ Moro, Leben, et al. *Localising humanitarian aid during armed conflict*. London School of Economics and Political Science. 2020.

³² Carver, Freddie. *A call to peacebuilding: rethinking humanitarian and development activity in South Sudan*. Humanitarian Practice Network. Issue 68. 26 January 2017.

Examples of Positive Changes

Challenges notwithstanding, the CSRF has observed and supported organisational and systemic approaches that showed promise and success at addressing these challenges. Three types of approaches, and their limitations, are lightly explored here but are considered in greater detail throughout two sets of case studies undertaken by the CSRF in 2022 and 2024.

Better analysis leads to better design and implementation.

Robust analysis that regularly asks the right questions, in the right ways, of the right people can help organisations avoid contributing to conflicts, make contributions to societal strengths, support inclusion and community ownership, and increase sustainability. A few examples witnessed and supported by the CSRF over the past ten years include:

- ❖ In 2020, the aid sector underestimated the impact of the violence in Jonglei on local IPC levels, largely due to a lack of understanding of the nature and import of intercommunal violence. Initially perceived somehow as ‘primitive’ or locally-driven, collective analysis by the CSRF, WFP, OCHA and others highlighted the connections to national level political dynamics, enabling a more accurate understanding of the causes of the violence and the impact. This led to improved planning, improved response, the inclusion of conflict sensitivity in the Humanitarian Response Plan, and better understanding of the drivers of conflict in the area.³³
- ❖ In 2021, UNYMPDA, a NNGO, was conducting peace work in Jonglei – with many challenges. After realising that they had neglected to include women’s perspectives in their analysis, a new space of engagement opened up for them. Due to local cultural gender norms, women refused to attend the NNGO’s normal meetings that were held at hotels. New meetings were set up outside under trees, and with the new analysis, the NNGO was able to coordinate a series of peace activities that were much more successful than past attempts.³⁴
- ❖ From 2024-2026, the EU and the Embassy of the Netherlands used CSRF-produced analysis about agro-pastoralism, conservation, Unity State dynamics, and climate change, leading to more contextually-informed and conflict-sensitive programmes.³⁵

Limitations: While analysis of structural drivers of conflict may stay relevant for decades, many more specific areas of analysis can become outdated quickly and must be updated regularly. In some situations, analysis may be outdated by the time it is published. Analysis can run the risk of being extractive and controlled by international actors, overlooking local agency. If data or findings are subject to censorship or approval they be politicised.

³³ CSRF. *Case Study: Understanding the Nature of Conflict*. February 2022. <https://csrf-southsudan.org/repository/csrf-case-study-4-understanding-the-nature-of-conflict/>

³⁴ CSRF. *Case Study: Inclusion and Consultation*. February 2022. <https://csrf-southsudan.org/repository/csrf-case-study-1-inclusion-and-consultation/>

³⁵ Interview with CSRF team member. 3 February 2026.

Collective action leads to more coherent, holistic approaches.

Many of the conflict sensitivity dilemmas facing humanitarian, development and peacebuilding programmes in South Sudan require collective action, a united front and holistic approaches. Examples where this was tried include:

- ❖ Between 2019 and 2021, aid actors were being asked to facilitate politicised returns of IDPs, something that ran counter to humanitarian principles and risked embedding new conflict dynamics that could persist for decades. The CSRF, the protection cluster, UN, NGOs and donor actors developed a common position and strategy on managing this dilemma, which had hitherto been shaped by competition and acrimony between aid agencies, and with the government.³⁶
- ❖ The Partnership for Peacebuilding, Resilience and Recovery, from 2022-2024, is included here because it had both strengths that can be learned from, and weaknesses that ultimately undermined its potential. The concepts of collective outcomes, collective actions and local accountability to Area Reference Groups were good in concept, but never fully progressed past the planning stage, in part because of donor concerns that it remained a top-down, agency-driven approach rather than truly adaptive and accountable to the communities.

Limitations: Competition within the aid system disincentivises collaboration or information sharing (and is perceived to be deepening as aid cuts are felt). As collective approaches gain momentum, they may be captured by powerful agencies using their standing within aid leadership structures and networks with donors. NNGOs tend to be put into subordinate positions of delivery, rather than shaping and leading efforts.

Organisational commitment and creativity lead to meaningful changes on the ground.

Organisations have the potential to be engines of innovation in developing conflict sensitive approaches. The CSRF has identified leadership, technical expertise, and willingness to adapt (and fail), as key ingredients.

- ❖ Dozens of INGOs and UN Agencies have gone through the CSRF capacity strengthening programme over the past ten years. This is a long-term facilitated process of assessing opportunities and challenges for conflict sensitivity. Results vary, but examples include WFP's creation of a new Conflict Sensitivity Specialist position and a strategy on its contributions to peace; REACH integrating conflict sensitivity into the Needs Assessment Working Group and conflict sensitivity guidelines for research; and Tearfund developing minimum standards for their activities and checklists for proposals.
- ❖ NNGOs that have gone through the CSRF's NNGO mentorship programme have adapted approaches and policies in ways that have improved their conflict sensitivity on the ground. As an example, some have found that their procurement policies were discriminating against local businesses, raising tensions and perceptions of marginalisation. Changing requirements to

³⁶ CSRF. *Case Study: Navigating Complex Dilemmas*. February 2022. <https://csrf-southsudan.org/repository/csrf-case-study-3-navigating-complex-dilemmas/>

accommodate for local norms and capacities has helped to increase opportunities for women-owned businesses and local traders.

- ❖ In 2017, DFID (now FCDO) instituted a robust system of minimum standards for their own work and that of their partners, requiring analysis, and appropriate design, oversight, risk management and capacity strengthening. Though this was discontinued after 2019 due to institutional changeover, it was effective at shaping priorities and approaches for two years.

Limitations: Innovations and progress may be temporary and lost with personnel changes or due to changes in funding or donor requirements. Lessons are often not learned due to poor institutional memory and turnover.

Implications for a South Sudan Aid System in Crisis

Analysing the System

The durability, or resistance to change, of the aid system in South Sudan over the past decade reflects the complex web of incentive structures, norms, rules, and constraints that govern and shape the attitudes and actions of both individuals and organisations. Examples of positive deviance, as those described in the section above, highlight both what changes may be possible or meaningful, and what institutional and systemic forces may be acting against them. Systems analysis is a productive way to interrogate these forces and explore potential adaptations that may better incentivise and enable more effective, and more conflict-sensitive, aid. This is because it does not seek to problem-solve challenges with one-off solutions but instead seeks to influence patterns of behaviour over time.³⁷

Systems are often rigid and difficult to change. However, the current moment of crisis within the aid sector – both globally and in South Sudan – may offer an opportunity to think critically and act boldly in support of changes that would have been impossible a year ago.

Systems analysts tell us that there tends to be a trade-off between the ease of making a change, and how effective that change will be in terms of impacts on the system.³⁸ Analyst Donella Meadows proposed a list of 12 factors that shape systems with increasing levels of effectiveness. This list has been shortened and adapted for use as an analytical framework for this paper.

We will explore these in turn for their relevance to the current moment in South Sudan, and for their guidance as an uncertain future looms.

³⁷ For more work done on systems analysis of the aid system, refer to the START Network. [About Systems Change | Start Network](#)

³⁸ Meadows, Donella. *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*. The Sustainability Institute. 1999. <https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>

Compliance requirements and tools are the favoured tool of donors and implementers alike when seeking to change approaches and solve problems. Indeed, they are enticingly simple and inexpensive to put into place, from both a time and cost perspective. They are, unfortunately, not very effective at driving change. They add paperwork and bureaucracy and in so doing, slow down response times. They also raise the bar for the sorts of compliance-related skills that favour western, professionalised organisations over local, grassroots organisations, contributing to the ongoing industrialisation of the sector. Worse, when these requirements are approached in a performative way, they may give the outward illusion of compliance and action, while masking real challenges.

Leverage points for changing the South Sudan aid system

(In increasing order of effectiveness)

1. Compliance requirements and tools
2. The structure of information flows
3. The rules of the system
4. The power to evolve or change
5. The goals of the system
6. Principles, paradigm and the power to transcend paradigms.

Adapted from Donella Meadows, *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*. The Sustainability Institute. 1999

The structure of information flows in South Sudan's humanitarian, development and peacebuilding sectors reflect and reinforce power dynamics in multiple ways. Local knowledge is often mediated through international actors and influenced by international priorities, namely fundraising.³⁹ Knowledge of international funding mechanisms and decisions, on the other hand, are often generated and distributed along specific relational networks, and tied to proximity to donor country elites. South Sudanese communities, the actors who should be at the centre of defining and acting on aid priorities, have access to the least amount of information. Gatekeepers within the aid system and the government may withhold information that could be used to not only challenge and hold both aid actors and government to account, but that could also make aid more efficient and effective.⁴⁰

The power to evolve and change has been limited within the aid system in South Sudan. The competitive model of funding often defined value as the ability to 'deliver' a programme according to a pre-set budget and notion of success, much as a purchaser may contract a vendor for specific goods or services. Evolution therefore must take place under the auspices of what is largely a commercial model of delivery, wherein priorities are ultimately determined by the funding agency, rather than the community being supported.

The rules of the aid system shape incentives and define constraints. These are created by donors, the cluster system, the UN system, individual organisations (UN, INGO and NNGO), the South Sudan government (RRC, Ministry of Labour, local authorities) and, in some cases perhaps, the South Sudanese communities where aid is going. Each set of rules is intended to shape behaviour and decisions and operate in a space of contested authority and power. Access negotiations are such contested spaces where organisational and donor rules butt heads with rules of government authorities. But rules more commonly work in quiet but powerful ways, shaping options, priorities and decisions.

³⁹ Interview with South Sudanese Academic. 12 February 2026.

⁴⁰ Interview with international aid actor. 11 February 2026.

The goals of international assistance in South Sudan are ostensibly expressed in vision and mission statements on most organisations' websites and walls. However, these normative, idealised goals, are naturally only part of the story. Many other, quieter, goals are often more powerful in shaping behaviour. For the UN, INGO, and NNGO actors competing for and spending donor funding, survival is a key goal. For donor governments, the goals of international assistance have always been caught between a normative, principled-driven approach and a foreign-policy driven approach that centres on national interest. This dynamic tension has, in the past year, shifted definitively to the latter, and some countries are increasingly abandoning the rhetoric of assistance based on justice and empathy.⁴¹ For most actors, there are additional goals. These may include growth in size, budgets, mandate, and the related imperative to spend budgets under specific timeframes as well as gaining the respect of one's peers.⁴² For others, both national and international, these could include leveraging the value and work of aid for political or personal benefit of oneself or one's community.

Principles, paradigm and the power to transcend paradigms are combined in our framework here because of the fluidity of the current moment where the paradigmatic struggle and the implications for principles are bleeding together. The greatest potential for change exists at this level – normally the most difficult to shift, but at the moment in transition already to an unknown future. There may be a leverage point in this space now that didn't exist before, and that could rework the future. Paradigms are difficult to discern from the inside. From our analysis, we would highlight a few aspects of the paradigm that are becoming clarified insofar as they are increasingly contested:

- The paradigm of politics. Aid actors have historically sought to be neutral and impartial but often fail to comprehend the very political implications of how, where, why, and with whom they work.
- The paradigm of principles. Donor government aims have long balanced political and normative goals; the current context sees a sharp shift toward instrumentalised aid.
- The paradigm of practice. Aid sees itself as 'delivering' humanitarian, development and peacebuilding assistance through a competitive marketplace model.
- The paradigm of power and accountability. Power and accountability in the aid system flow upward, in a centralised way.

For the aid sector in South Sudan, there may be an opportunity, however, to not seek to compromise between paradigms, or invent a new one from scratch, but to instead learn from the wide variety of existing paradigms that exist within and across dozens of South Sudanese cultures. A forthcoming CSRF research by Dr. Luka Biong will examine historical and contemporary approaches to mutual aid in South Sudan and the implications for a future with markedly decreased aid flows.

The Manifesting Aid Crisis in South Sudan

In this section, we describe in more detail the nature of the challenges that must be addressed. It is not the purpose of this paper to describe in detail the changes that are being wrought in the aid system in

⁴¹ Lopes, Carlos. *When Empathy Fades: The Collapse of Humanitarian Responsibility in a Structurally Broken World*. Development Policy Review. 2025

⁴² "My boss wants me to bring in \$500,000 this year. It doesn't matter what the impacts are." Interview with UN actor. 16 January 2026.

South Sudan, nor the global pressures behind them – and indeed, it is too early. There are many questions that remain unanswered. However, given the mandate to provide recommendations and advice, it is important to take stock of the current context and possible directions.

The current aid crisis in South Sudan is felt first in terms of funding. The dismantling of USAID in 2025 led to a wave of funding cuts of unprecedented scale. Some organisations shut down, while others dramatically scaled back operations and programmes. Other donors have also reduced their spend and some are leaving the country, leading to the lowest levels of aid funding in South Sudan since 2011. The impacts are being felt across all sectors and through economic ripple effects on the markets for labour, goods and services. More offices and organisations are expected to close in the coming months and tens of thousands of South Sudanese are expected to have lost their jobs by next year, each of whom may be supporting dozens or more relatives with school fees, food, and other basic needs.

The changes in funding levels are accompanied by changes in aid priorities and principles. While recognising the long-standing dynamic tension between donor countries' commitment to principles and foreign policy objectives, 2025 ushered in a pointed shift toward the latter. In the case of the U.S., this shift also reflects domestic politics, as aid waiver requirements issued by the State Department prohibit U.S. foreign assistance from engaging in activities related to gender or diversity, equity and inclusion⁴³ – pillars of an international aid system that was, at least nominally, built on norms of equity and justice.⁴⁴

The crisis in aid is greeted by a range of critics who agree that there are longstanding problems within the aid sector, though their diagnoses and prescriptions vary widely. It makes for unlikely bedfellows.⁴⁵ Criticisms that find common ground include:

- Aid is unaccountable to those whom it is intended to support, and ought to centre local actors;
- Aid has become an industry that is self-serving and inefficient;
- Aid can feed into war economies and support entrenched interests.^{46, 47}

Beyond that, those seeking to influence the future of aid have wildly divergent criticisms and proposals for the future, pursuing very different scales, goals, sets of principles, relationship to foreign and domestic policies, economic and migration prevention aims, and theories of change. South Sudanese interviewed for this paper, and those whose voices are found on social media and in news reports over the past year are similarly divided. Some, particularly in Juba or living overseas, seem to take a grim satisfaction in the

⁴³ U.S. State Department. *Emergency Humanitarian Waiver to Foreign Assistance Pause*. 28 January 2025.

<https://www.state.gov/emergency-humanitarian-waiver-to-foreign-assistance-pause>

⁴⁴ Schenkenberg van Mierop, Ed. *Let's not pretend the US wants to fund principled humanitarian action*. The New Humanitarian. 12 February 2026.

⁴⁵ For example, William Steiger, a key contributor to the U.S. Project 2025 chapter on USAID which has informed the Trump Administration's approach to inclusion and principled aid is also a [champion of localisation](#).

⁴⁶ Heritage Foundation. Project 2025. https://static.heritage.org/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf

⁴⁷ Mohamud, Mohamed Hassan. *Lack of Accountability, not budget cuts, is the real humanitarian crisis*. Disasters. 2025.

aid reduction, believing that it came with costs: aid dependency at the individual, community or national level; harmful foreign influence; inflation; and reduced government accountability to its people.^{48, 49} Others, particularly in areas experiencing severe displacement, see the withdrawal of aid as catastrophic and existential, despite many long-running frustrations with how aid was delivered and targeted, and the perceived corruption of local leaders.⁵⁰ This is not an argument for sustaining an untenable, short-term solution indefinitely. The longer a community resides in a camp setting, the more traditional livelihoods and knowledge are lost, and the more market dependency sets in.⁵¹ Aid actors working in these camps question whether emergency relief has been provided too long but complain that the humanitarian designation of such areas prevents the larger system from intervening with longer-term solutions.

Lessons for the future of aid in South Sudan (and elsewhere)

In this section, we seek to weave together the strands explored earlier in this paper, starting with the footprints of aid across the South Sudan landscape for decades and their interaction (understood or not) with the power and social dynamics that perpetuate conflict over generations. Then we explored where the aid system has shown an ability and willingness to undertake meaningful action, as well as the systemic constraints that shape aid's more durable characteristics. Next, we applied a systems analysis framework to better understand leverage points within the aid system that could be used to reform, or transform, those most problematic aspects against the backdrop of an aid system in crisis, both within South Sudan and globally. In this section, we present four areas for growth and action that we hope synthesise the analysis both practically and meaningfully.

1. **Get the goals right and reconfigure the system to incentivise them.** In line with the systems analysis framework that was presented, we believe that adapting the goals of a system is both tangible and discrete enough to be done with intention and pragmatism and powerful enough to create real changes in how aid is delivered and what its effects are.⁵² In the current context, the unstated goals of organisational competition, growth or survival often supersede aid organisations' official goals. But the recommendation goes further than seeking to realign and balance incentives toward impact and away from organisational competition and survival. It also means to critically analyse what needs aid is seeking to respond to, and ensure that these will create transformation and growth, not just perpetuate or subsidise unsustainable situations. Some of these potential goals are explored further in the next two recommendations.
2. **Work 'with,' not 'for.'** Perhaps one of the surprising lessons of the current moment is that, despite massive differences of policy and opinion between right and left-wing politics in the west, there is a broad-based agreement that localising aid responses, being more accountable to communities, and providing more direct funding to local actors is necessary. It is perhaps even more surprising

⁴⁸ Falzetta, Joseph. *Aid cuts push South Sudan into uncharted territory*. The New Humanitarian. 29 Apr. 2025. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2025/04/29/aid-cuts-south-sudan-uncharted-territory>

⁴⁹ Interview with South Sudanese aid worker. 5 February 2026.

⁵⁰ Focus Group Discussion in Bentiu. January 2026.

⁵¹ Many of those who were displaced in 2013 knew how to farm and herd cattle; community members interviewed for this paper only mentioned hairdressing and baking as valuable livelihoods. Interview in Bentiu. January 2026.

⁵² Principles are more powerful for shaping behaviour but are harder to mandate as areas of intervention.

given the poor record of the aid system so far in acting on this imperative. Evidence from South Sudan suggests that funding cuts are hitting national NGOs first, and international organisations are competing for survival for the remaining donor funding. This trend seems to confirm some of the worst criticism of the aid sector. However, to provide an alternative that doesn't hand over strategic direction and aid's resources to a government that has not yet shown itself able or willing to be accountable to its people, new modalities that enable community accountability (over both aid actors and government) need to urgently be developed. It should go without saying that the best, most sustainable solution to any humanitarian, development or peacebuilding need is the one that is developed by the affected community, using local resources, local knowledge and local relationships.⁵³ The aid community may be well positioned to help surface and pursue new potential ideas based on global experiences or new technology, but the ideas will need to be owned by the community to take root and lead to long-term change.

3. **Focus on removing barriers and building enabling infrastructure that allows people to meet their own needs.** The aid system sees itself as a delivery system and as an implementer. This paradigm often leads to zero sum games of inclusion/exclusion, manipulation, and winners and losers as some groups are targeted for support and others are not. In a context of decreasing support available, this calculation becomes more fraught – aid will tend to find its way to those most easily reached, rather than those most in need, and a greater percentage will likely be captured by the inevitable gatekeepers. We suggest that instead of focusing on the delivery of goods and services, donor funding instead focus on removing barriers that currently prevent communities from meeting their own needs or building infrastructure that enables the same. Enabling infrastructure could be physical, but often soft infrastructure is the missing ingredient:
 - a. Information and knowledge. This includes skills, education, awareness of options, health-related information and ways to meet needs.
 - b. Relationships. Opportunities to build positive relationships between communities and with the diaspora have the potential to produce webs of information and resource sharing, build trust, identify shared desires, and produce collective approaches to meeting those.
 - c. Technology. This includes information technology, climate and weather modelling, agricultural and livelihood developments, health advancements, and many others.
 - d. Environment and climate. South Sudan's natural resources are threatened. As the region continues to grow in population, South Sudan's water will be increasingly sought after. Similarly, oil and gold mining-related pollution threatens the health and livelihoods of many communities. Climate change may lead to changes to ecosystems and require adaptation that can be supported. For example, an invasive grass is spreading in Warrap and affecting livelihoods. A poor aid response would be to provide food. A better aid response would be to help the community learn how to manage this invasive species.⁵⁴

⁵³ Malloch-Brown, Mark, et al. *Global Development is lost in the fog. But it can adopt a new compass.* ODI Global. 21 January 2026. <https://odi.org/en/insights/global-development-is-lost-in-the-fog-but-it-can-adopt-a-new-compass/>

⁵⁴ Interview with international academic. 6 February 2026.

- e. Accountability and justice. Access to justice is a core need for communities to invest, grow, and leave behind cycles of revenge and violence. For this reason, we consider this to be part of an enabling infrastructure for peace and prosperity, one that benefits the whole of society.
4. **Throw out measures of success that count the number of people reached.** A new paradigm of aid requires different measures of success. Defining success as ‘people reached’ or ‘items given’ leads to perverse incentives that undermine principles and strategic decision making. Providing emergency relief to people in a camp for more than a decade is a success from the metric of reaching large numbers of people in a predictable manner, but it is hardly in the interest of the community itself. Our opportunity now is to look for better ways of measuring success that lead to more creativity and better outcomes.

Conclusion

Perhaps one of the biggest lessons learned in the past year is the degree to which the aid system in South Sudan is intimately bound up with the global aid system and paradigm. The rules-based, normative approach to international and domestic order is being contested in new ways in South Sudan and globally. Likewise, the idea that conflict is concentrated in certain countries and not others, or that certain countries' democracies are secure and others are not, is proving false. We are all connected in systems of mutual support, social services, competition and conflict. Perhaps this can help us to reflect about the commonalities across all societies, the types of assistance all communities need, and what that means for aid going forward.

Many of the ideas and recommendations presented above require coordinated action amongst dispersed groups. Key in these groups are the donor governments providing the resources that fund the system. These governments are all embedded within their own national systems, with their own unique sets of paradigms, goals, and rules. The approach to aid is not likely to shape these national dynamics; it is more likely that the aid sector (such as it is, or such as it will become) will need to fit itself into a new reality.

In that context, the CSRF's ten years as a critical friend to the aid sector in South Sudan suggest that principles are foundational. They are both instrumental in building common ground between groups that are otherwise at odds, they help us to navigate and make sense of difficult dilemmas, and they help us to ensure our actions align with our goals. Meaningful discussions about principles at all levels helps to create new shared stories about what aid can and should do, and how it can adapt to meet new challenges.

We must also be tolerant of complexity. Reducing complexity to simple binary choices is useful for machines, but not for engaging with complex human systems. There are times when answers are unknowable, and our approaches must encourage constant learning and adaptation in terms of how we define our goals, how we pursue them, and how we measure our success.

Finally, we must see the communities we are serving as we would want our own communities to be seen. Complex ecosystems of strengths and weaknesses, wisdom and folly, knowledge and ignorance, but powerful in their connections and their ability to solve their own problems and contribute to a better future.