Rebuilding Trust and Social Cohesion in Post-War Sudan: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract:

This study examines the social, economic and psychological impacts of the war that erupted in Sudan in April 2023 and explores the prospects for building trust and restoring social cohesion and national unity in the post-war context. The primary objective of the study is to address the social consequences of the conflict and investigate the strategies and mechanisms that can contribute to restoring social cohesion.

One of the key findings highlights the challenges of rebuilding trust within Sudanese society over a short period, due to the widespread violations and extensive destruction caused by the war. However, the study suggests that trust can be restored through unconventional strategies and mechanisms that draw on international and regional experiences, while carefully considering Sudan's unique social, cultural and historical context. Moreover, the study emphasizes that the process of trust-building and restoring social cohesion in Sudan will be long-term and will require sustained, coordinated efforts, given the scale of violations accompanying the war. It further stresses the importance of adopting comprehensive monitoring and evaluation frameworks to measure progress or setbacks, identify gaps and ensure continuous improvement in achieving the desired objectives.

Keywords: *Sudanese War; Social Cohesion; Human Rights; Hate Speech; Rapid Support Forces; Sudanese Armed Forces.*

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Introduction:

Wars often lead to the erosion of trust, the weakening of social bonds, and the fostering of fear and hatred among a nation's groups. Countries experiencing post-conflict periods face significant challenges in rebuilding trust and restoring social cohesion, both of which are essential for achieving sustainable peace. This study underscores the importance of implementing effective mechanisms to rebuild the social fabric in post-conflict contexts, ensuring security and stability in Sudan.

The war in Sudan, which began on April 15, 2023, and is still ongoing (May 2024), has resulted in the deaths of over 100,000 people. Fifteen million Sudanese have left their homes, including 12 million internally displaced within Sudan but in other regions, and 3 million refugees to neighbouring countries, in addition to massive infrastructure destruction, economic collapse, and severe human rights violations, including torture, forced displacement, looting, and rape. These factors have deepened social divisions and exacerbated mistrust, making the restoration of trust a critical challenge in the post-war recovery process.

Study Problem:

The study Problem focuses on how trust can be rebuilt and social cohesion restored in Sudan following the war. This inquiry leads to several related sub-questions: What are the impacts of the war on relationships between different groups within Sudanese society? What strategies and mechanisms are effective for restoring trust? Can Sudan benefit from the experiences of other countries in rebuilding trust and achieving lasting peace?

Study Importance:

The significance of this study lies in its focus on the critical issue of rebuilding trust among the components of Sudanese society following the conflict, as this represents the primary pathway to achieving sustainable peace and returning to normalcy. Moreover, the study contributes to the identification of policies that address divisions and enhance national unity. Its forward-looking approach is also essential in setting post-war Sudanese policy priorities.

Study Objectives:

The study aims to assess the social, economic, and psychological impacts of the conflict, analyze successful global reconciliation experiences for relevant insights, identify potential challenges to trust restoration efforts, and propose appropriate solutions.

Study Hypotheses:

The study is based on two hypotheses: first, the conflict has left profound negative impacts on Sudanese society, rendering trust restoration a major

challenge that requires substantial and sustained efforts; second, the process of rebuilding trust necessitates comprehensive strategies encompassing economic, social, and cultural policies.

Study Methodology:

The study uses an analytical approach to examine the impacts of the war, a comparative method to explore global and regional reconciliation experiences, and a case study approach to understand the social impacts and identify appropriate mechanisms for restoring trust and enhancing national unity post-conflict. Additionally, it adopts a foresight approach to develop future peacebuilding scenarios.

Wars and Social Cohesion: A Theoretical Framework

Social cohesion refers to "the vertical and horizontal relations among members of society and the state that hold society together. Social cohesion is characterized by a set of attitudes and behavioral manifestations that includes trust, an inclusive identity and cooperation for the common good" (Fiedler, 2003, 3). It is analyzed at three levels: micro (personal bonds within families and among friends), meso (ties to larger social groups), and macro (connections within broader society) (Lalot et *al.*, 2022). Political studies tend to focus on macro and meso levels, with macro indicators including trust in political institutions and their perceived justice and competence (Lalot *et al*., 2022). Four key indicators for measuring horizontal relationships within society include community cooperation, social tolerance, social proximity, and absence of social threat (Munich et *al.*, 2023).

Wars and violent conflicts significantly disrupt the social fabric. Blattman and Miguel highlight that "the social and institutional legacies of conflict are arguably the most important but least understood of all war impacts" (Blattman, 2010, 42). War erodes trust, weakens security, reduces cooperation, and leads to displacement and fragmentation. While external wars, like the Russian-Ukrainian war, may strengthen national bonds, internal conflicts generally have a negative impact on social cohesion (Deineko, 2023). Some studies suggest that wars can lead to increased social cooperation once the conflict is over, though this is not consistent and often overshadowed by negative consequences. A study on Uganda's war (2002-2005) found a significant decline in trust in areas with intense fighting, particularly towards outsiders (Rohner *et al.*, 2013). Another study by De Luca and Verpoorten (2015) showed that although war initially decreases trust, social capital can recover rapidly after violence ends, emphasizing the importance of time in rebuilding trust.

To foster social cohesion in conflict-affected areas, scholars recommend a long-term approach, including comprehensive reconciliation, integration of social cohesion into development plans, improved governance, fair service delivery,

community participation, adaptability, and robust monitoring and evaluation. Success in restoring trust and social cohesion depends not only on the severity of the conflict but also on the ability to move beyond it, requiring more time and effort in cases of prolonged conflicts with severe violations (Cox et *al.*, 2023).

II. The Sudanese War and Its Implications on Social Cohesion in Sudan

The Sudanese war between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), has had a profound impact on Sudan's social cohesion. The RSF, originating from the *Janjaweed* militia formed during the Darfur conflict in 2003, gained prominence with support from former President Omar al-Bashir, using the group against Darfur rebels. By 2013, the RSF was restructured under the National Intelligence and Security Service, under the leadership of Hemetti. The RSF expanded its role in national security to include border protection, suppressing protests, combating illegal migration, and participating in the Yemen war, which boosted its financial resources and influence.

After Bashir's ouster in 2019, the RSF and the military formed the Transitional Military Council, later evolving into the Sovereignty Council to manage Sudan's transitional period. Tensions emerged due to Hemetti's ambitions for greater control, his monopoly over gold mining, and his independent recruitment of armed forces. The military accused the RSF of destabilizing political unity. Conflict escalated when Hemetti rejected the army's proposal to integrate the RSF into the army with two years. Instead, he proposed a period of ten years. This unresolved tension led to open conflict in April 2023, exacerbating the challenges to Sudan's unity.

The war also saw participation of mercenaries from Niger, Chad, and Libya, further complicating the conflict. Various external interventions, with some countries supporting the RSF politically and others supplying arms and money, intensified the fighting, leading to heavy civilian casualties and worsening the humanitarian crisis. The war resulted, in addition to severe economic, social, and security problems, the weakening national cohesion and the erosion of trust among Sudanese communities.

Economic Impacts: The war devastated Sudan's fragile infrastructure, damaging buildings, roads, bridges, hospitals, schools, and power plants, while halting agricultural, industrial, and service activities. As a result, Sudan's GDP fell by 25% in the first year of the war (UN, April 14, 2024), and many citizens lost their livelihoods, plunging millions into poverty and hunger. Domestic and foreign investments dwindled, further hindering economic development. Food insecurity became widespread, affecting approximately 18 million people. The World Food Programme (WFP) warned of an impending hunger crisis, labeling Sudan's situation as one of the world's worst (WFP, 2024).

By April 2024, the UN estimated that over 25 million people, more than half of Sudan's population, required humanitarian aid (Ferragamo and Roy, 2024). The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF issued grave warnings about the humanitarian catastrophe, especially in Darfur, Khartoum, and the border regions, with families resorting to extreme measures, including eating tree bark to survive (Alden Young, 2024). Despite the UN's request for $2.7 billion in aid, only a fraction was raised due to competing global crises (Alden Young, 2024).

Social Impacts: The war exacerbated ethnic, tribal, and regional conflicts, deepening divisions among Sudanese communities. Social gaps widened, and hate speech escalated, contributing to the fragmentation of the nation's social fabric. Large-scale displacement occurred, with 3 million Sudanese fleeing to neighboring countries like Egypt, Chad, and South Sudan, and over 9 million displaced within Sudan itself (France 24, 2024). The shortage of food and the lack of healthcare led to the spread of diseases such as cholera and malaria.

Security Impacts: Security collapsed in much of Sudan, with reported deaths exceeding 16,000, and estimates suggesting that the actual toll could reach 150,000. Crime rates surged, and properties were looted. Mercenaries and rebels occupied homes, and the government lost control of several areas, allowing unchecked violence. A UN investigation found that the RSF and its allied militias committed war crimes, including rape, sexual slavery, forced displacement, and child recruitment (UN, 2024). Amnesty International (2024) reported targeted ethnic violence against the Massalit group in West Darfur, with brutal attacks in towns like Geneina, where at least 1,000 victims were buried in mass graves (Michael and McNeill, 2023).

International and Regional Experiences in Restoring Trust and Promoting Social Cohesion after Wars

Several countries that faced civil wars, leading to a breakdown of their social fabric, have managed to restore national unity and social cohesion through specific strategies implemented by their governments. Below are some examples of such experiences:

1. The Rwandan Experience:

In 1994, Rwanda experienced a devastating civil war sparked by the assassination of President Habyarimana. This led to an uprising by the Hutu ethnic group against the Tutsi group, culminating in a genocide that resulted in the deaths of over 800,000 civilians, mostly Tutsis, and the displacement of nearly 2 million people. The conflict deeply eroded trust between the Hutus and Tutsis, exacerbated by hate speech.

The war ended in July 1994 when the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), led by Tutsi Kagame, took control of Kigali and much of the country, prompting many Hutus to flee. A coalition government was formed with Hutu Bizimungu as

president and Kagame as vice president and defense minister. This government emphasized national unity, reconciliation, and the repatriation of refugees, adopting the slogan "One Rwanda for all Rwandans."

A national dialogue was initiated, leading to the establishment of significant institutions such as the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, Gacaca Courts, and the National Dialogue Council. These played key roles in healing the nation. The Gacaca Courts, based on traditional dispute resolution, allowed perpetrators to confess and seek forgiveness, with a focus on reconciliation and reconstruction (Sentama, 2022).

Politically, the Rwandan government promoted equal rights, fought ethnic discrimination, and worked to contain hate speech while promoting peace. The banning of ethnic labels like Tutsi and Hutu, along with cultural institutions like the "I am Rwandan" organization, helped to foster solidarity. Memorials were also established to preserve the memory of the genocide in the context of reconciliation (Sentama, 2022).

The transitional government focused on economic development and educational reform, striving to promote national identity and ensure that future generations transcended ethnic divisions. However, Rwanda's post-genocide efforts have faced criticism. Compensation for looted or destroyed property was deemed inadequate, and the government was accused of selectively addressing past crimes, focusing mainly on those committed by the defeated Hutu government, while crimes by the RPF were largely overlooked (Common Ground Site, 2023). Despite these challenges, Rwanda’s experience is often cited as a successful model of post-war recovery and economic development.

To apply lessons from Rwanda to other post-conflict societies, academic Sentama stresses the importance of state leadership in preparing for national reconciliation, in collaboration with informal institutions. He advocates for reconciliation mechanisms that align with community traditions, ensuring inclusivity, non-selectivity, and regular monitoring to address emerging challenges (Sentama, 2022).

2. South Africa's Experience:

South Africa experienced institutionalized racial discrimination under apartheid, where non-whites were marginalized and treated as second-class citizens. The apartheid regime implemented strict policies, including the segregation of public facilities, inferior education for non-whites, and movement restrictions on Black people through a permit system. These measures caused widespread oppression, injustice, and social unrest, culminating in violent clashes that persisted until apartheid was dismantled in the 1990s.

Following Nelson Mandela's election in 1994, the South African government sought to address past violations and compensate victims. Civil society

organizations played a crucial role in a yearlong public dialogue that led to the creation of the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act No. 34 of 1995. This law established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The TRC aimed to uncover the causes and nature of human rights violations between 1960 and 1994, identify victims for compensation, and offer amnesty to those who fully disclosed their involvement in human rights violations. Rather than seeking vengeance, the TRC focused on building "a historical bridge between a painful past and a future based on peaceful coexistence" (Idali, 2020, p. 28).

The TRC consisted of three subcommittees: the Human Rights Committee, which documented testimonies and investigated violations; the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee, which provided support to victims; and the Amnesty Committee, which reviewed amnesty applications. The TRC's final report identified perpetrators and detailed the violations, with confessions framed as acts of repentance, often supported by religious institutions playing a key role in the process (Idali, 2020).

In 1996, South Africa adopted a new constitution aimed at overcoming historical divisions and building a democratic society based on social justice and human rights. The preamble emphasized addressing historical divisions, promoting democratic values, and ensuring equality for all citizens. It also focused on improving citizens' quality of life and building a unified state that could regain its position internationally. Articles 10 to 15 emphasized equal citizenship, the right to life, the protection of human dignity, and guarantees for religious freedom and individual rights (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

Economically, the government launched the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP) to improve living conditions and productivity. The White Paper on Land Reform sought to create a framework for land restitution, redistribution, and ownership reform. However, these initiatives faced challenges due to limited financial resources and competing priorities such as housing, healthcare, and education (Kloppers and Pienaar, 2014).

To address economic disparities caused by apartheid, the government introduced the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) Act in 1994, aimed at increasing Black ownership of businesses and productive resources. In 2003, the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) Act was introduced to facilitate Black participation in ownership and management across sectors, with preferential procurement policies encouraging the purchase of goods and services from Black-owned businesses. Amendments through Act No. 46 of 2013 strengthened the focus on empowering Black communities through social initiatives and cooperatives (Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 2016).

Mandela's government also focused on addressing educational disparities. The White Paper on Education aimed to ensure equal access to education for Black

citizens. Moreover, infrastructure improvements in Black communities, particularly in housing, water, and sanitation, were prioritized to enhance living conditions and reduce the inequalities inherited from apartheid.

3. The Northern Ireland Experience:

In 1921 Ireland was divided into the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The latter remained part of the United Kingdom. This division led to intense conflict, particularly between Catholic nationalists, who sought unification with the Republic of Ireland, and Protestants, who wanted to remain within the UK. This conflict, known as "The Troubles," spanned from 1968 to 1998, resulting in over 3,500 deaths. The Good Friday Agreement, signed on April 10, 1998, marked a significant turning point, establishing key provisions for peace, including power sharing between Protestants and Catholics, civil and political rights, cultural equality, police reform, disarmament of paramilitary groups, and the release of prisoners. It also recognized individuals' rights to self-identify as Irish, British, or both (Coogan, 1996).

Constitutional amendments following the agreement restored Northern Ireland's self-governance, emphasizing human rights and equality across political, religious, and ethnic lines. Northern Ireland adopted the European Charter of Human Rights and created a Human Rights Commission to address reconciliation and support victims of violence. Additionally, efforts were made to ensure fair employment, with measures like monitoring the religious composition of the workforce and implementing affirmative action to address inequalities (Bouandel, 2011).

Integrated education played a critical role in promoting peace. Established in 1981 by Catholic and Protestant parents under the slogan "All Children Together," integrated schools aimed to unite children from both communities. The Integrated Education Council of Northern Ireland described the initiative as "a story of civic courage" and believed that integrating students could foster both academic achievement and peace (Council for Integrated Education, 2024). These schools emphasized cultural and religious awareness, promoting respect, understanding, and cooperation among students. The programs aimed to reduce sectarian tensions and encourage tolerance. Research observed that young people from integrated education backgrounds were more open to building a future free from past crises, while older individuals remained more resistant to change (Abdul Amir, 2021).

Despite these efforts, Northern Ireland has faced challenges to stability, with some areas experiencing a resurgence of limited violence. However, the peace-building processes, particularly through power-sharing, human rights initiatives, and integrated education, have significantly contributed to reducing the scope of conflict and promoting a more peaceful and inclusive society.

International and Regional Experiences and Lessons for Sudan

This study analyzes three models—Rwanda, South Africa, and Northern Ireland—that offer different insights into restoring trust in post-conflict societies, with considerations for Sudan's unique context. Rwanda recovered from its 1990s civil war through strategic planning, South Africa overcame apartheid through reconciliation, trials, and development programs, and Northern Ireland ended its three-decade sectarian conflict through a combination of security, economic, legal, constitutional, cultural, and educational measures.

Key success factors across these models include addressing past injustices, ensuring accountability, promoting economic development, reducing inequality, institutional reform, reconciliation, and fostering national identity through education and culture. Charismatic leaders, such as Mandela in South Africa and Kagame in Rwanda, were pivotal in uniting divided societies during transitions.

These models provide a foundation for Sudan, though its circumstances differ significantly. Sudan’s ongoing conflict, which began between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces, has escalated into tribal and regional tensions, compounded by the country's ethnic and cultural diversity. Poor governance since Sudan's independence in 1956 has fueled recurrent conflicts, including the South Sudan war (1955), Darfur crisis (2003), and violence in South Kordofan and Blue Nile (2011). A comprehensive solution addressing ethnic, cultural, and developmental marginalization is critical for breaking Sudan's cycle of conflict.

The first step to restoring trust is ending the war and establishing a legitimate, competent government that all factions can trust to address the aftermath of the conflict. Following South Africa’s model, a process to expose past abuses, allow victims to be heard, and enable perpetrators to confess and seek forgiveness is essential. However, Sudan’s unique challenges, including widespread violations and sexual violence, may require unconventional solutions. Coexistence without addressing past atrocities is unsustainable, as demonstrated by Northern Ireland’s setbacks due to prioritizing power-sharing over national reconciliation (Pentikäinen, 2019).

Constitutional amendments ensuring equality, justice, and human rights are vital for lasting peace, as seen in the case studies. For Sudan, a new constitution is necessary, addressing systemic flaws and prioritizing equality, freedom, human rights, good governance, sustainable development, and minority rights, with clear provisions for establishing a stable and peaceful order.

Reconciliation, community dialogue, and victim support require an active civil society, empowered politically, financially, and legally to organize inclusive national dialogues, support victims, combat hate speech, and rehabilitate war victims. Civil society can enhance youth leadership and community engagement

through workshops and training, but it must also be recognized and empowered by both the government and society.

Cultural aspects are crucial in mending Sudan's social fabric. Educational, media, and cultural institutions must play a role, as demonstrated in Rwanda and South Africa, where curricula were revised to promote values of tolerance and cultural diversity. Integrated schools in Northern Ireland also helped unite Catholic and Protestant communities. Similarly, the media in these countries contributed to reconciliation and trust building, a role that Sudan's media could adopt to rebuild trust and address the war's social consequences.

Political and economic marginalization has been a key driver of conflict in Rwanda, South Africa, and Northern Ireland, and each adopted developmental plans to address the grievances of marginalized groups. In Sudan, economic marginalization has been a core issue since 1955, driving the demands of rebel movements across regions such as South Sudan, Darfur, Eastern Sudan, and South Kordofan and Blue Nile (The Charter of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army, 2012). A focus on balanced development post-war, with efforts to utilize local resources and support small and medium-sized enterprises, is essential for addressing social grievances and improving living standards. Power sharing, based on clear and agreed-upon criteria, is also crucial, as political marginalization and competition were central issues during the war.

While the study offers valuable lessons from other nations, Sudan's unique social dynamics present specific challenges and opportunities for rebuilding trust and promoting national unity in the post-conflict period. These challenges and opportunities will shape Sudan's future peace and unity.

The conflict in Sudan has led to significant challenges, primarily involving grave violations and displacement. In Darfur, the RSF and allied militias conducted "ethnic cleansing," displacing nearly 700,000 individuals. Widespread sexual violence, affecting victims as young as 8 and as old as 75, was used as a means of terrorizing communities based on alleged ties to "enemies" (The Guardian, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2024). These atrocities, particularly sexual assault, generate a strong desire for revenge, which hinders the process of reconciliation and forgiveness. Furthermore, the extensive use of social media to incite hatred has deepened ethnic, regional, and tribal divides, exacerbating violence and societal rejection. These divisions are not merely the result of current political rhetoric but are rooted in Sudan's political history, which perpetuated cultural, racial, and systemic discrimination against marginalized groups. Superficial solutions like halting hate speech fail to address these deeper issues (Koudi, 2024). Additionally, external intervention in the conflict, with support flowing to rebels from international and regional powers, has prolonged the war and intensified its devastation. Some diplomats view the crisis as part of a broader foreign project to reshape Sudan's

social, cultural, and economic systems to secure regional powers' interests, further complicating peace efforts (Ataa Al-Manan Bakhit, 2024).

However, despite these challenges, there are notable opportunities to rebuild trust among Sudanese groups. One significant opportunity arising from the war is the redefinition of identities. Ethnic divisions, once the dominant force in Sudanese society, have been overshadowed by the stance on the war itself, highlighting that ethnic divisions may be more dangerous than political differences. While certain regions, especially Darfur, saw the war intensifying tribal animosities, it also led to significant public solidarity across Sudan. This solidarity has united Sudanese citizens against the RSF and strengthened support for the Sudanese Armed Forces, especially in response to the RSF's severe violations. If the RSF is defeated, this newfound unity could form the basis for overcoming past ethnic, racial, and regional divisions, contributing to social cohesion. Another critical opportunity for peace lies in the growing public awareness of the dangers of war and armed militias. The war, having reached the central regions of Sudan, has shocked citizens who had previously been distant from the peripheral conflicts. The brutality of the war, despite prior hate speech, has heightened awareness of the destructive potential of armed movements, which could reduce the chances of future conflicts and strengthen social cohesion (Makkawi, 2024).

Moreover, the war has increased awareness of the dangers posed by foreign intervention. Once dismissed as conspiracy theories, the foreign support for the RSF has revealed the extent of external influence in Sudan’s internal conflict. Citizens now recognize the scale of foreign involvement and its adverse effects on the country. General al-Burhan, Chairman of the Sudanese Sovereignty Council, addressed this issue at the 41st Extraordinary Summit of Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Djibouti, highlighting the foreign provision of weapons, mercenaries, and political support to militias, which prolonged and worsened the crisis. This foreign interference may contribute to stronger domestic unity and enhanced social cohesion.

Conclusion:

Despite the devastating effects of war on trust and social cohesion, many studies suggest that societies affected by conflict can recover if effective strategies are designed to rebuild cohesion. This study draws on successful post-conflict recovery experiences from countries like Rwanda, South Africa, and Northern Ireland to provide lessons for Sudan. Common factors contributing to the success of these experiences include competent leadership, acknowledgment of past wrongs, the implementation of transitional justice, equitable economic growth, institutional transparency, and cultural and educational initiatives aimed at fostering national unity. Some of these strategies can be applied in Sudan to restore trust and peace, considering the country's specific context.

Sudan faces both opportunities and challenges in its quest to restore trust and social cohesion, and its success or failure will depend on its ability to capitalize on available opportunities and overcome obstacles. One of the key opportunities is the popular solidarity created by the war between Sudanese factions in their fight against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), as well as the increased public awareness of the dangers posed by militias and foreign interventions. On the other hand, widespread human rights violations associated with the war, including killings, displacement, and sexual violence, have fueled a desire for revenge and increased hate speech, complicating reconciliation efforts.

Achieving social cohesion and sustainable peace in Sudan requires a comprehensive approach, including justice, reconciliation, inclusive development, and cultural reforms. Key actions for Sudan's recovery involve strong transitional leadership, implementing transitional justice mechanisms, economic development to address disparities, and reforms in education and cultural policies to strengthen national identity. Reducing foreign interference, promoting institutional reforms, encouraging public participation, and combating hate speech are also essential components of a sustainable peace strategy.

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