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THE UNITED NATIONS MISSION IN SOUTH SUDAN AND HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

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Abstract

The State of South Sudan descended into violent conflicts shortly after its independence in 2011. This precipitated a severe humanitarian crisis which the country was unable to handle. The United Nations, in line with international humanitarian law established the UN Mission in South Sudan to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to affected populations. However, while UNMISS intervened, the humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate raising the issue of the effectiveness of UNMISS in the discharge of its mandate. This study investigates why humanitarian crisis persisted in spite of the establishment of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative secondary data from 2011-2024 and premised on the humanitarian-development approach, it argues that the UN humanitarian intervention was justified given the scale of the humanitarian crisis and the weak capacity of the South Sudanese State. UNMISS coordinated humanitarian assistance and brokered agreements between South Sudan and Sudan which enabled the creation of humanitarian corridors and access to humanitarian aid. However, UNMISS faced challenges which included increasing humanitarian needs, inadequate funding of humanitarian interventions by the UN, disproportionate delivery of humanitarian aid to internally displaced persons, restriction of access to humanitarian assistance by government of South Sudan as an instrument of war, and inaccessibility of some conflict–affected areas due to natural disasters and ongoing conflicts. The study has suggested that in order to fully address the humanitarian crisis, the peace process must be pursued to its logical conclusion, creating enduring peace where affected populations will be able to meet their human needs, leading to the end of their dependence on humanitarian assistance.

Key Words: The United Nations, South Sudan, Humanitarian crisis, internally displaced Persons (IDPs, humanitarian assistance.

Introduction

The primary duty of the government of South Sudan is to ensure the safety of lives and property within its own territorial entity. The provision of physical and human security are the core responsibilities of the State. Additionally, the State is responsible for harnessing human and material endowments and directly or indirectly creating enabling conditions that enhance the well-being, prosperity and development of citizens and society at large. However, the search for good governance and development has been elusive, and South Sudan has been embroiled in persistent struggles for political power, political instability, economic crisis, conflicts, wars, and ethnic cleansing with attendant colossal humanitarian crisis which qualify as complex emergencies.

South Sudan gained independence in 2011 after many years of self-determination struggles. In 2013, the newly formed state became entangled in previously unheard-of complicated conflicts that unleashed a complex humanitarian crisis. To avert the outbreak of

hostilities between South Sudan and Sudan after the former's independence, the United Nations preemptively established the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) early in 2011. The South Sudanese authorities were unable to respond satisfactorily to the humanitarian emergency. UNMISS was established and tasked with facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected populations. However, while UNMISS carried out its mandate, South Sudan continued to face severe challenges in the delivery of humanitarian assistance and undergo transition from war to peace, recovery and development. Why did South Sudan continue to experience challenges with the delivery of humanitarian assistance despite the establishment of UNMIIS with the mandate to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance? This article seeks to unravel the issues around the ineffectiveness of UNMISS.

Conceptual Clarifications

Humanitarian Crisis

Delivery of humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected populations occurs in the context of humanitarian crises which are either natural or manmade. According to the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (2017, p.10), "a humanitarian crisis is understood as a situation in which there is a widespread threat to human life, safety, health and well-being". Humanitarian crisis is a situation in which there is an exceptional and generalized threat to human life, health or subsistence. This usually occurs within the context of a new or an existing situation of a lack of protection where a series of pre-existent factors i.e. poverty, inequality, lack of access to basic services etc. - exacerbated by a natural disaster or armed conflict, multiply the destructive effects on affected populations (Office for the Coordinator for Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) (2010).

Humanitarian crisis sometimes occurs as complex emergency (OCHA, 2010). A complex emergency is a multifaceted humanitarian crisis that occurs when there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict which requires a multi-sectoral international response that goes beyond the mandate and capacity of any single agency and or the ongoing humanitarian intervention (OCHA, 2008). This means that "conflict coincides with multiple additional factors, such as environmental, economic and social instabilities" (OIC, 2017, p.10). Four indicators are used to determine the existence of a humanitarian crisis in a country; (a) the seriousness of food crisis, (b) pattern of forced internal displacement (c) the number of refugees assisted by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and (d) the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) (OCHA, 2010).

Humanitarian Assistance

Humanitarian assistance is generally accepted to mean the aid and action designed to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain and protect human dignity during and in the aftermath of man-made crisis and natural disaster, as well as to prevent and strengthen preparedness for the occurrence of such situations (Good Humanitarian Assistance, 2013). Humanitarian assistance covers a wide range of activities, including the provision of food, shelter, education, healthcare and protection. The State is the primary bearer of responsibility for managing humanitarian emergencies. It is responsible for assisting and protecting people affected by an emergency within its boundaries, including leading and coordinating the humanitarian response (The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), 2015). However, in cases where the State is unable or unwilling to carry out its international commitments, the resident coordinator (RC) (who is the representative of the United Nations) is mandated to make every effort to guarantee that conflict affected populations or those in need get the support and protection they need while upholding the sovereignty of the state (ICRC, 2009; IASC, 2015).

Humanitarian access is a key issue in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Humanitarian access refers to the ability of affected people to claim and reach humanitarian aid and protection, as well as the ability of humanitarian assistance to deliver life-saving services to victims in accordance with humanitarian principles (Geneva Call, 2020). Where access is constrained, victims suffer, and millions of civilians affected by wars or conflict are unable to access critical aid, increasing the burden on humanitarian actors tend to reach those in need of humanitarian assistance (Barber, 2009; Harmer, Stoddard & Sarazen, 2018).

The four Geneva Conventions (1949) and their Additional Protocol II, ratified in 1977, and Common Article 3 of the Convention guarantee unhindered access to humanitarian assistance during non-international conflicts. The aim of Common Article 3 is to guarantee that the worst humanitarian atrocities during war are prohibited in both international and non-international conflicts. It further states that "persons not taking part in hostilities shall be treated humanely, violence to life and outrages upon personal dignity shall be prohibited, and the wounded and sick shall be collected and cared for." The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (2015) further states that in accordance with Article 14 of Protocol II, starvation should not be used as a weapon of war. Therefore, Articles 14 and 18 entail a State's duty to accept humanitarian aid in cases when doing otherwise will cause harm to civilian population at risk of starvation or pose other threats to their survival.

Customary international laws and norms of humanitarian also provide a legal basis humanitarian assistance in armed conflicts. For instance, a common law rule of access known as "Rule 55: Access for Humanitarian Relief to Civilians in Need" states that "The parties to a conflict must allow and facilitate the rapid and unhindered passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need, subject to their right of control, which is impartial in character and conducted without any adverse distinction" (International Committee of the Red Cross) (ICRC, 2015).

Furthermore, humanitarian actors mediate agreements with opposing parties to deliver humanitarian assistance. Generally referred to as "red lines," "ground rules," and "joint operating principles," these agreements set boundaries or requirements which are adhered to by the humanitarian community. Red lines are also created in collaboration with the parties in conflict demonstrating a shared commitment to guarantee safe passage of humanitarian aid (Harmer, Stoddard, & Sarazen, 2018). Humanitarian actors are guided by core principles which are humanism, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntarism, unity, and universality (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (2015).

Safeguarding marginalized communities and recognizing the diversity of the affected are crucial for effective delivery of humanitarian assistance. The USAID (2015 p. 10) states that "Effective humanitarian response must prioritize certain extremely vulnerable groups within disaster-affected communities. There is also the need to coordinate humanitarian response to guarantee a cogent and moral response to humanitarian emergency when humanitarian crisis occurs and various humanitarian actors intervene (Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2019). To avoid a chaotic response and as no single organization covers all humanitarian needs, coordination of humanitarian response is a necessity (OCHA, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

This article is anchored on the humanitarian-development approach (Cunningham, 2017; Lie, 2020; International Peace Institute (2018). The United Nations World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 brought increased focus to this approach on a global scale. The International Peace Institute (IPI) (2018, p. 1) explains the rationale behind this approach by arguing that "Humanitarian action was traditionally designed to be an emergency response – the provision of

life-saving assistance when conflict erupts or disaster strikes. The idea of humanitarian action being strictly a short-term "and-aid" however, is increasingly perceived as inaccurate and even undesirable."

The humanitarian-development approach seeks to reconsider the connections between humanitarian action, development, peace, and security within the international community. It views humanitarian efforts as a means of laying the groundwork for peace and development (The International Peace Institute, 2018). The strategy is referred to as "sustaining peace" by the International Peace Institute (2018). The four main assumptions of sustaining peace are as follows (i) Peace is a state of mind that grows from below. Top-down approaches to conflict resolution, rarely establish long-lasting, positive peace unless they are anchored in local communities and aware of local agency, needs, and potential capacities for peace (ii) Recognize and address the causes and consequences of conflict (iii) External intervention should not inadvertently worsen the conflict or impair the ability for healing and reconciliation (iv) Where international humanitarian assistance is tailored to security, human rights, development, and humanitarian needs there is greater chance of establishing the conditions necessary for maintaining peace (International Peace Institute (IPI), 2018).

The humanitarian-development approach recognizes the fact that, while humanitarian assistance is crucial for meeting the needs of those impacted by conflicts, it is insufficient to address the challenges of peace, recovery, and development. It aims to address the root causes of humanitarian crisis and connect humanitarian intervention with conflict prevention (Strand, 2020; Lie, 2020). The emphasis is on "war-to-peace transition" (Lie, 2020). In applying this theory to this analysis, it is argued that the mandate assigned to UNMISS by the UN Security Council fell short of the humanitarian development approach. UNMISS was not assigned a direct role in the peace process which is crucial to recovery and development. Thus, the armed conflicts persisted while UNMISS continued to deliver humanitarian assistance which negates the humanitarian-development approach.

UNMISS and Delivery Humanitarian Assistance

Through Resolution 1999 of the UN Security Council adopted on July 8th 2011, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) (UN SC, 2011) was established with three components: (a) a Special Representative appointed by the UN Secretary General; (b) a civilian component made up of UN officials and other individuals assigned by the Secretary General to assist the Special Representative or made available by participating States; and (c) a military component made up of military and civilian personnel made available to UNMISS by participating States to serve as part of UNMISS (Status of Forces Agreement, 2011).

UNMISS was initially entrusted with maintaining South Sudan's peace and security and assisting the government in building the state capacity required for efficient, democratic governance (Jochemsen, 2022). It was created with the intention of averting a resumption of hostilities between South Sudan and Sudan upon their separation (Hunt, 2020). At its inception, UNMISS had 7,000 military personnel and 9,000 civilians. After the first year, these figures were expected to decline as peace was expected to return but were rather increased due to ongoing hostilities. Since then, the UN Security Council (UN SC) has continuously extended the mandate of UNMISS.

Through Resolution 2567 (2021) UNMISS tasked to avert the resumption of civil conflict, establish lasting peace, and promote inclusive, responsible governance in addition to free, fair, and peaceful elections in line with the revitalized peace accord of 2018. Relying on Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the UN Security Council assigned an original multidimensional mandate to

UNMISS to support peace consolidation to foster state-building and economic development, provide assistance to the South Sudanese government in order to prevent, mitigate, end, and safeguard civilians from conflict and develop the state's ability to uphold the rule of law, provide security, and bolster the judicial system. Thus, UNMISS was tasked with using "all means necessary" to promote peace, safeguard people, discourage violence, and ensure the safety of UN personnel (UN Security Council, 2013).

However, through Resolution S/RES/2187 (2014) the UN Security Council changed UNMISS's mandate from a multifaceted state-building mission to one specifically focused on protecting civilians, monitoring, investigating, and reporting human rights violations, improving the delivery of humanitarian aid, and assisting in the political process to put an end to hostilities and implement the revitalized peace agreement (UN Security Council, 2014). To facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance, UNMISS relied on the use of Protection of persons (PoC) sites to enable humanitarian organizations to provide aid assistance to vulnerable people. The concentration of resources and skewed attention given to PoCs imperiled the delivery of humanitarian assistance in remote areas away from the PoC sites (Jochemsen, 2022).

The delivery of humanitarian assistance in South Sudan by UNMISS was not very effective. In 2020, humanitarian access was interrupted and 635 metric tons of food and nutrition for Gumuruk, Pierei and Nyadin were looted (Geneva Call, 2020). Also, there was looting of World Food Programme (WFP) warehouses and detainment of the agency's staff in refugee camps under government control in places where UNMISS had limited access (World Food Programme, (WFP); 2021; Jochemsen, 2022). Furthermore, there were 563 security incidents involving humanitarian personnel in the 2019–2020 performance period, resulting in the deaths of 7 humanitarian workers (Jochemsen, 2022).

Four factors constrained the delivery of humanitarian aid in South Sudan. First, ongoing conflicts and violence hampered the delivery of aid supplies (Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD) (2024). Humanitarian vehicles were targeted and damaged, and staff members robbed (Human Rights Council, 2017). Aid workers were also victims of violent attacks and killings. In 2013, at least 67 aid workers were reportedly killed. Overall, 831 humanitarian access incidents involving assaults, ambushes and armed attacks on aid workers were reported in Eastern Equatoria, Central Equatoria, Western Equatoria, Lakes and Western Bahr Ghazal from January to November 2016 for which nobody was held accountable. Consequently, 116 aid workers were relocated from Central Equatorial, Upper Nile and Unity in December, 2016 (Human Rights Council, 2017).

Second, UNMISS focused more on PoC sites rather than the larger South Sudanese society. Third, "humanitarian access was used by the South Sudanese government as a war strategy" (Geneva Call, 2020, p.3). Government imposed restrictions on movement of aid, including preventing aid delivery to civilians in opposition-controlled territories. It resorted to selective granting and denial of humanitarian access to populations perceived to be hostile to the government in places like Equatoria, Southern Unity, West Bank, White Nile and Yei River State (Human Rights Council, 2017). It has been reported that eight humanitarian organisations received a directive from the National Security Service on December 31, 2016, to cease operations. This included sending relief convoys to Panyiyar, Nyong, and Ganyliel by road and boat (Human Rights Council, 2017). Despite the growing humanitarian crisis, in December 2016, the Government ordered senior staff members of an international humanitarian organization to leave South Sudan, without any explanation (Human Rights Council, 2017). Prior to the 2018 peace deal, UNMISS was also handicapped by the difficulty of securing flight

clearances from the government for aid delivery. Aid delivery was also negatively impacted by COVID-19 and intense flooding (OCHA, 2021).

Table 1: Humanitarian Needs and humanitarian response 2013-2021

Year of appeal	People in need	People targeted	Requirements (us$)	Funding received	% Funded
2013	4.6M	3.3M	1.1B	772M	72%
2014	7.3M	3.8M	1.8B	1.6B	88%
2015	6.4M	4.1M	1.6B	1.1B	66%
2016	6.1M	5.1M	1.3B	1.2B	92%
2017	7.5M	5.8M	1.6B	1.2B	71%
2018	7.0M	6.0M	1.7B	1.2B	70%
2019	7.1M	5.7M	1.5B	1.0B	67%
2020	7.5M	5.6M	1.9B	1.2B	65%
2021	8.3M	6.6M	1.7B	1.7B	100%

Source: OCHA Humanitarian Response Plan (2021)

Table 1 makes it abundantly evident that as the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance rose from 4.6 million in 2013 to 7.5 million in 2017 and 8.3 million in 2021. The humanitarian situation in South Sudan deteriorated. Nonetheless, the number of needy individuals targeted for aid was less than the total number of needy individuals. For instance, only 3.3 million of the 4.6 million individuals were targeted in 2013. Out of 7.5 million persons, 5.8 million were the target in 2017. Out of 8.3 million, 6.6 million were the aim in 2021. This implies that funding and humanitarian deliveries were inadequate. Similarly, the required funding for humanitarian assistance for those targeted was not met. For example, in 2013, $1.1billion was targeted for humanitarian assistance while only $722million was realized from consolidated appeals. In 2017, targeted funding was 1.6 billion, while received funding was $1.2billion. Only in 2021 was UNMISS able to meet the targeted funding of $1.7 Billion.

UNMISS tried unsuccessfully to overcome most of the bottlenecks. Occasionally, it provided security services to humanitarian agencies and their workers to enable them gain access to high conflict areas for the delivery of humanitarian assistance. It also improved road infrastructure and road networks as well as deployment of air gadgets to enable more efficient delivery of humanitarian aid. However, much of its military capability was concentrated around its major bases (Jochemsen, 2022). In 2014, UNMISS embarked on negotiation for humanitarian corridors for impacted populations to be reached with aid (Castiglioni, Constantinidi, & Ferioli, 2014). Signed by the Head of UNMISS and representatives of South Sudan and Sudan, the agreements allowed the transportation of aid by road, river and air. This enabled the World Food Programme (WFP) to deliver approximately 63, 000 metric tons of food assistance to 744, 000 people in northern parts of South Sudan (Castiglioni, Constantinidi & Ferioli, 2014). The World Food Programme (WFP) also provided 27000 metric tonnes of food assistance to an estimated 300,000 people in the northern South Sudanese States of Maban, Melut, Renk, and Wadakona since July 2014 (OCHA, 2016). Delivering humanitarian aid through Sudan was effective because South Sudan's civilian populations in need were found in the Upper Nile, Jonglei, and the Unity States that bordered Sudan (OCHA, 2016). Following renewed hostilities and famine, another humanitarian corridor was established from El_Obeid in central Sudan to Bentiu in the Unity State of South Sudan on the 30th June 2017.

Despite UNMISS efforts, the humanitarian crisis in South Sudan worsened and the UN on 20 February 2017 officially declared famine in South Sudan (Mena & Hilhorst, 2022). Mena and Hilhorst (2022, p.1) lamented that "The case of South Sudan in general and particularly the response to the famine declared by the United Nations in 2017 presents a sobering picture regarding the agility of humanitarian action". This was due to the intensification of fighting between government and opposition forces in the Equatoria Western Bahr el Ghazal, the Upper Nile region and other parts of the country (Human Rights Council, 2017) which prevented people from undertaking their economic activities, including farming. More than 4.9 million people (42%) of the population were severely food insecure. More than 7 million people were in need of urgent humanitarian assistance and protection in 2017 (OCHA, 2017). Consequently, food inflation set in as the price of staples reached record levels; in some areas, four times the price a year ago (Human Rights Council, 2017). An estimated 8.9 million (OCHA, 2022) and 8.4 million (Human Rights Watch, 2024; UNICEF, 2025) people were in need of humanitarian assistance in 2022 and 2023 respectively. Again 4.9 million children were in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023(Human Rights Watch, 2024; UNICEF, 2025).

Conclusion

Unlike prior works that treat UNMISS mainly as a protection mission (International Peace Institute, 2020; Eyanae, 2022; Keyroy, & Ryan, 2024.), this article examines UNMISS from the perspective of humanitarian-development approach. It examines why humanitarian crisis persisted in South Sudan in spite of the establishment of UNMISS. It also examines the structural factors that imperiled the missions' effectiveness and the efforts it made in overcoming its bottlenecks; especially the behind-the-scenes humanitarian corridor diplomacy. It establishes that the UNMISS was unable to effectively deliver aid in South Sudan due to ongoing conflicts and attacks on aid workers, inadequate funding of humanitarian assistance, narrow focus on protection sites, inaccessibility of certain humanitarian communities due to flooding, and the blockage of humanitarian access and use of aid access as a strategy of war by the South Sudanese State. This reality falls short of achieving peace, recovery and development. Thus, moving forward requires that UNMISS works towards peace consolidation. The resolution of the conflict in South Sudan is, therefore, critical in achieving the transition from war to peace and development. The Transitional Government in South Sudan must collaborate with UNMISS and other relevant organizations to achieve peace and delivery of humanitarian assistance. The restoration of democratic governance without further extension of the transitional government is critical to the entrenchment of good governance required for entrenching long-lasting peace and development beyond the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

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