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Can Southern Sudan survive in a tough neighbourhood?

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Can Southern Sudan survive in a tough neighbourhood?

Bonn, 11 July 2011. On 9 July 2011 the birth of the UN's 193rd member was celebrated with a declaration of independence, a flag raising ceremony and a parade. Sudan became two separate nation-states in accordance with the will of the southern Sudanese people, who voted almost unanimously for secession in the January 2011 referendum.

Even if it has only been inevitable since January, independence formalises a split that has (with hindsight) been likely since Sudan's civil war ended with the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Despite ample warning, the international community's preparations for its newest member have been inadequate. In particular, the regional dimension of Southern Sudan's independence has not received enough attention. Independence for Southern Sudan provides an opportunity to articulate a vision for the Horn of Africa, which the international community and the region's governments can work towards over the next 20 years. This window will not stay open for long.

A massive challenge

International focus has understandably been on Sudan's dire security situation, where complex border disputes, particularly over the status of the disputed Abyei province, could plunge the region back into war. A continued UN presence in Southern Sudan itself is likely due to ongoing conflicts between the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M) and several ethnic groups, in which the SPLA has been accused of gross human rights violations. These issues have been skilfully exploited by the Sudanese government in Khartoum. In recent years differences between UN Security Council members over how to engage with Sudanese President and alleged war criminal Omar al-Bashir have further weakened international efforts to break the cycle of poverty and violence.

Southern Sudan's chronic socio-economic underdevelopment is both a cause and a consequence

of insecurity. Development indicators do not inspire confidence that the country is well prepared for independence: prior to the split, Sudan struggled with around 4.9 million Internally Displaced Persons (the highest number worldwide), many of whom are expected to return to the South. Over 90% of Southern Sudanese live on less than US\$1 a day. The quality of public services, physical and social infrastructure is extremely poor. The country has among the world's lowest rates of formal education and health care provision. The government is comprised mostly of former rebel fighters transformed into politicians, and nepotism and corruption are major problems. Overwhelmingly dependent on oil revenues and the north's oil pipelines and refineries, Southern Sudan will clearly need international support for many years.

A reactive, rather than proactive, international approach

Thus far the international community has been unable or unwilling to take a proactive stance towards Sudan's development. The approach in both the north and the south has moved from emergency relief to recovery and back to emergency mode, and few steps have been taken to tackle long-term development priorities. A large portion of Sudan's total Official Development Assistance, US\$2.3bn in 2009, was in the form of humanitarian aid (US\$1.8bn). In Southern Sudan, the focus has been on implementing the CPA and preparing for the January referendum with less attention on the aftermath. US Aid and the European Commission have focussed on providing basic services, while Chinese engagement has until recently centred almost exclusively on oil. Poor coordination among public and private sector donors has not helped increase the SPLM's capacity.

Some donors have taken initial steps to better link relief, rehabilitation and development. The World Bank has proposed a new US\$75m Southern Sudan trust fund. The EU is working on a joint

Commission/member states programme corresponding to Southern Sudan's 2011 – 2013 development plan, backed by €285m from the European Development Fund. Projects in education, health, rural economy, urban planning, water management and rule of law are planned. The EU will open a full delegation in Juba and several member states will open new embassies, raising hope that development cooperation can deepen alongside diplomatic relations, which previously had to be based in Khartoum.

A regional deal for the Horn of Africa?

While this approach is welcome, foreign aid and development projects will not be sufficient. Southern Sudan's medium-term strategy needs to move 'beyond aid' towards mutually beneficial cooperation with its neighbours in the Horn of Africa.

The foundations for regional economic integration are there, if the political will can be found to build on them. The countries of the Horn have comparative advantages in natural resources and other factors of production that could – theoretically – be traded to increase the welfare of the region. A recent study by UK think-tank Chatham House envisaged a sub-regional deal based on Ethiopian hydroelectricity, southern Sudanese oil, Sudanese agriculture and Egyptian investment. From an outside perspective the potential of such a deal ought to be obvious, but mistrust among

the region's governments makes it appear an impossible dream.

An opportunity that should not be missed

The independence of Southern Sudan provides a unique chance for a troubled neighbourhood to start to escape its brutal past. However, the euphoria will soon fade as the massive challenges of building a country virtually from scratch become apparent. A development vision for the new country and its region is needed that can provide a reference point in the face of recurring humanitarian and security crises. The international community has the tools at its disposal to incentivise a concrete regional deal: debt relief through the Paris Club, technical integration support from the European Union, Chinese and Middle Eastern investment, American brokerage and African Union leadership could collectively make a major difference, if directed towards the same objective and coordinated effectively.

Unfortunately this level of international engagement does not appear to be forthcoming. Western donors are struggling to come up with a coherent plan, and apart from Omar al-Bashir, who was in Beijing last month, nobody seems to be talking to the Chinese. The region's governments continue to eye each other suspiciously and purchase weapons. If the international community cannot lift its act quickly, it is likely that Africa and the world will be burdened by another failed state.