

In Brief

The humanitarian crisis in South Sudan is the product of decades of violence and political conflict, driven by a culture of impunity, dependency, and the “weaponization of aid.” To understand this conflict better, the CSIS Humanitarian Agenda, in partnership with the CSIS Project on Prosperity and Development, hosted a panel of experts with a keynote address by Ambassador Molly Phee examining the context of the crisis and the consequences of facilitating humanitarian access in South Sudan. Discussants agreed that the violence in South Sudan is political in nature. Therefore, understanding how to work with this complex political landscape locally, regionally, and nationally is a fundamental pre-requisite to improving access to and delivery of aid. The participants were Mary Catherine “Molly” Phee, former Ambassador to South Sudan and Former Deputy Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, Joel Charny, Executive Director at the Norwegian Refugee Council USA, and Kate Almquist Knopf, Director at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University.

The current humanitarian assistance plan in South Sudan is unsustainable. In 2017 alone, the U.S. donated almost 1 billion USD of humanitarian assistance. Yet, infrastructure remains poor and insecurity plagues critical geographic areas, resulting in costly air operations to transport people and goods. According to the speakers, the fundamental driver of humanitarian challenges in South Sudan is the longstanding political conflict based on broad and unresolved differences between South Sudanese leaders. Despite the international community’s best efforts, armed groups continue to use humanitarian assistance as part of a strategy to maintain power and control civilian populations.

To adequately address South Sudan’s humanitarian crisis, the speakers agreed that donors and implementers need to work together to prioritize access and outcomes at a community level, replacing failed “redlines” at the national level. They asked that the Juba government be a better partner in enabling access while urging the international community to strive for policy changes that would restore South Sudanese agency and prioritize justice and accountability to improve outcomes for the people of South Sudan. Speakers also agreed that a solution to this crisis is contingent on unifying approaches between donors and implementers to break the cycle of impunity and dependency.

Access Challenges and Impunity

Humanitarian assistance has changed considerably over the past few decades; today’s humanitarian workers are operating in areas of protracted conflict rather than predominantly responding to natural disasters. These protracted humanitarian crises are further affected by numerous challenges, such as shifting political realities and frontline negotiations.

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According to Ambassador Phee, a significant challenge facing humanitarian assistance programs in South Sudan is a “culture of impunity.” She stated that “no matter what they do they think the West will provide aid. So, they can kill humanitarian workers, they can detain them, they can extort money, they can prevent access.” Consequently, there is a dependency on foreign assistance as a source of revenue and a “weaponization of aid” by armed forces who selectively distribute aid to civilians. Similarly, Almquist Knopf argued that in places where the markets have collapsed, aid is being used to turn the wheels of a stalled economy.

Moreover, speakers discussed the effects of putting assistance into a resource-starved and heavily politicized environment, where armed actors often use civilian populations as part of their military strategies. According to Almquist Knopf, there is a need for those studying this conflict to understand how government forces are using assistance as a weapon. Charny emphasized the humanitarian imperative as a key reason to continue providing assistance and argued that humanitarian organizations should focus on impact and effectiveness. Charny agreed that humanitarian and development actors could do a better job in localizing their activities, especially if doing so increased access and led to safer work environments for humanitarian workers.

“South Sudan is the most dangerous country for humanitarian workers in the world.” -Joel Charny

Participants agreed that addressing humanitarian access challenges required a joint focus by donors and implementers, who needed to resolve that they would have zero-tolerance for exploitative behavior. Donors have a larger responsibility to provide a buffer for humanitarian agencies working to implement in dangerous and difficult circumstances. According to Charny, “South Sudan is the most dangerous country for humanitarian workers in the world.” Charny cited that while several of the current security measures being taken were inadequate, some may be headed in the right direction. He also called on humanitarian organizations to become more agile, flexible, and community-based, arguing that national redlines are ineffective. He was very positive about regional level engagement, especially by and through South Sudan’s neighbors. Charny cited a regional example where a local commander had captured aid agency vehicles in the area. The agencies, who came together in solidarity, asked the commander to return their vehicles or else they would “walk.” Vehicles were promptly returned illustrating the power of local and regional level pressure.

Paths Forward

Speakers warned that the conflicting parties in South Sudan may be fracturing and there is a need to understand the pressure of operating in such a complex environment. The discussion drew

attention to the increasingly fractured nature of the conflict, especially among opposition actors, though Ambassador Phee cautioned that this thinking should not be taken too far. “I think we run a danger in our analysis in overemphasizing the way the conflict has fractured,” said the ambassador while noting these are communities that know how to communicate with one another. She went on to discuss how the leadership of South Sudan has remained in power for decades, while the Western presence is subject to regular turnover.

Indeed, the humanitarian crisis will remain unresolved unless the conflict comes to a permanent end. Inadequate security has been the primary threat to the delivery of any external assistance. Ambassador Phee remarked that compared to the situation between 2014 to 2016, the difference has truly been the loss of the Equatorias and the destabilization in Wau, where there has been “horrific violence.”

“The metrics for our success cannot be the dollars we spend or the degree of access we think we have. It needs to be on the humanitarian outcome that results.” - Kate Almquist Knopf

The speakers agreed that the best path forward was to collaborate between implementers, donors, and other partners and to seek a collective approach to the challenges of humanitarian access. There was a universal acknowledgment that the international community has the power to be influential when operating as a united front, but there were differing notions on the exact nature of the path forward.

Almquist Knopf stated that “the metrics for our success cannot be the dollars we spend or the degree of access we think we have. It needs to be on the humanitarian outcome that results.” Ambassador Phee challenged the South Sudanese government’s proposed head-tax on aid workers, as she argued that it further reinforced the political economy side of the conflict, with the government desperately searching for sources of revenue. Almquist Knopf was resolute that the path forward required actors to “prioritize justice and accountability,” and argued that one of the long lessons from this conflict has been overlooking grievances – both within and between communities – by the state against the civilian population. She did not feel this was adequately addressed in the comprehensive peace agreement and said that it must be dealt with should any stakeholder want the social fabric of the country ever to come back together. “We have to deal with justice for justice’s sake, and I think that can only help to enable humanitarian and economic and other social development needs for the country,” she went on to say.

Ultimately, the speakers concluded that the crisis in South Sudan had no simple fix and that humanitarian organizations and the international community will have to work together to ensure access, while also understanding the role aid plays in sustaining the political economy. By identifying these measures, the humanitarian community can push for lasting and meaningful solutions.

Panelists left the audience with these parting thoughts:

“Do not give up. We still have the influence, we still matter, and the people of South Sudan still have the capability to ask these tough questions and get better answers.”

–Ambassador Phee

“We need to be more agile, more flexible, and more community-based.”

–Joel Charny

“I would say that South Sudan is certainly a situation that can be turned around through political solutions.”

–Kate Almquist Knopf