

Restoring Hope through OD in South Sudan

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Peace is not an event. It is not merely the absence of war. It takes time to build. This is a story of how a strategic planning process is contributing to restoring trust, self-esteem and hope in a Diocese in South Sudan. At CORAT Africa, we believe that any OD process has to appreciate and address the underlying contextual challenges. In this post-conflict context in South Sudan we have to walk patiently alongside the church, enabling and ensuring widespread participation in the OD process. As OD consultants we have the challenging privilege of accompanying the church on its mission to bring new life from the chaos of war.

Post-conflict chaos and opportunity

South Sudan has been ravaged by not just one, but two major civil wars. This has left the country economically, politically, **socially** and spiritually wounded. It is bereft of infrastructure and basic services. But the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 and the declaration of the Independence of South Sudan in 2011 have offered some ray of hope and the potential for real and lasting change. Refugees are returning home from both inside and outside of the country. Roads have been reopened, making even the most remote communities increasingly accessible.

The church's role in creating change in South Sudan cannot be underestimated. While South Sudan is already awash with many international agencies, the church as one of the few local civil society organizations is being relied upon by many to restore hope. Indeed, the church played a key role in the past transformation of the country. The church spoke out for the people, secured humanitarian relief and even mediated the peace agreement with the National Government. It is the church that holds the key to the future of the country.

Rising to the challenge in Hope Diocese

Bishop Peter from Hope Diocese (names disguised) was well-aware of these challenges. His Diocese of four million people covers close to one third of the country. He realized that in the post-war era, his Diocese needed to become clearer about its direction in a new environment and indeed country. He also realized that as his retirement approached he needed a plan for the Diocese that would ensure continuity and involvement. Back in the 1980s and 1990s Bishop Peter had been in contact with CORAT Africa and wrote to us in 2011 asking about the possibility of support. First he had to raise money to cover the costs. But with so many other priorities the initiative appeared to go cold.

A last-minute meeting at CORAT Africa one Sunday in late 2011 (while the Bishop was in transit to the USA for a fund raising mission) helped put the initiative back on track. The Bishop was still convinced something needed to be done. He said: *"Now we have our own*

government. It is a starting point for the re-birth of a country. Now is the time for us to have a structured way of doing things". It still took a further year for anything to materialize. But eventually late last year the OD process got underway.

The challenges of the OD process

In November 2012, two of us from CORAT visited Hope Diocese. We did a baseline survey to identify the needs of the communities and to prioritize activities with them. This process fed into a structured and inclusive strategic planning process. The first workshop was planned for December. But at the last minute civil unrest flared in the region and we could not get flights. We had to postpone the event until January. Eventually it did take place and 40 selected church leaders and representatives from various zones attended. Some participants travelled almost 300 kilometers.

But the situation for OD in South Sudan was really difficult - largely a legacy of the war. Genuine peace was still a long way off. Trust was a rare commodity. Trust was absent amongst key leaders in the church. People were still clearly divided on ethnic lines. There was little hope for the future. As Bishop Peter said: *"As soon as we get organized something always comes up... for the last 40 years the church has been characterized with devastating war"*.

The conflict had also left people with a legacy of learned helplessness. People had little self-esteem with which to take up their responsibilities. The prevailing view was that: *'Someone from outside must come and solve our problems'*. Outsiders were the only trusted ones. Even in Hope Diocese the Development Adviser and the person in charge of pastoral development are expatriates. External people are still driving the agenda, which can easily undermine local ownership. Local skills and experience are still very limited - even something as simple as writing things down does not fit the oral culture. Even by asking CORAT to help - an African, but not Sudanese organization - meant that we were still part of the dependence problem.

The post-war culture further undermined our attempts to facilitating an inclusive OD process. Men tended to dominate, with women's roles and contributions not really recognized. Men were still accustomed to fighting in order to get what they want. The idea of resolving issues through dialogue and discussion was quite a challenge.

We also faced numerous logistical constraints with flights cancelled and meetings postponed. A cancelled flight at the end of our first visit, meant we were stuck in the region for a whole extra week trying to sort out the logistics of getting home. At such times we felt like giving up. And yet we knew that if we were to stand alongside the people of Sudan we had to make headway.

Making headway

If we were to address the underlying challenges in the South Sudan context we had to make this OD process highly participatory. It was vital to integrate divided communities

and get them working together. We believe it was essential for them to see the process as theirs and to genuinely own it. It meant we involved people from far-off regions. When language was an issue (as most people could not speak English) we engaged an Arabic translator. This enabled community members to express themselves vividly and managed to prioritize well-articulated strategic objectives.

Facilitating such a participatory process required incredible patience and persistence - not only with the cancelled flights. Despite the tough terrains, hot climate, bad roads, we felt it essential to cover all the areas within the jurisdiction of the Dioceses.

We reinforced the OD work with training for key diocesan staff. For example two inexperienced staff heading up the finances and education department, came to courses at CORAT Africa where they met their peers from other countries and received applied input. We also addressed some of the divisions in the church with a team building session to bring greater unity and understanding between the priests and Diocese staff from church headquarters.

We realized that to make progress the Diocese needed specific prioritized plans for what to do. So we ensured that each zone left the workshops with a clear action plan which they could hold themselves accountable to and be monitored on.

Over time, we have come to recognize that we at CORAT Africa are accompanying Hope Diocese on a journey. We are not just writing a strategy report for them. Fortunately we had allowed room in the budget for follow-through. So every time Bishop Peter visits Nairobi for the Sudan Bishop's Conference, we look forward to meeting him. We also email and phone the Development Adviser and Pastoral Adviser every so often to monitor progress and provide support.

Making a difference

Hope Diocese now has a strategic plan that is informed by the knowledge of the people and owned by the people. This has enabled the Diocese to provide better social services, to transform the lives and empower communities.

But the challenges have not evaporated. The Bishop realizes that: *"The diocese is carrying a great population of broken people"*. He is concerned that the church is heavily reliant on donor support, even now in new independent Sudan. This is being adversely affected by the global economic crisis. He is desperate to see: *"the church taking up responsibility and working toward self-sustainability and evangelizing itself"*

Patience and participation

It took almost 30 years from the first visit to the Diocese by the CORAT Africa Executive Director to 2013 when the Diocese eventually developed its own development and pastoral strategy. Patience is key. We have to take time to understand and move at the pace of the local church, rather than ignore them in favor of the fast-moving

international NGOs. It is only with local ownership that communities begin to take up initiatives and champion their own development agenda.

We have found that especially post-conflict contexts, an OD approach of empowering people to own the process essential. You have to restore trust through involvement. Propagating “a people’s own process” was vital to challenge the dependence mindset and inspire people that “yes they can do it”. After all, it is only the people themselves, with the help of God, who have the resources and the abilities to rebuild their own church and indeed create a new nation.