Education in a country emerging from war

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This essay examines the impact of war on education and on how improvements in schooling can help a nation emerge from war. It is based on my experience with others in the design, building, developing and sustaining of Ibba Girls Boarding School (IGBS) in South Sudan. The essay derives from my twin roles. First, as a university professor of public leadership and management (including not only public leadership and management but also organizational change, innovation and improvement). I became involved in South Sudan with Professor John Benington and others from Warwick University in running workshops to help train civil servants after the signing of the peace agreement which signalled the end of the very long civil war and before the formal independence of southern Sudan which became South Sudan. Since then, I have visited South Sudan many times as a volunteer and trustee of the UK charity Friends of Ibba Girls School, South Sudan (FIGS), which we set up in 2011 specifically to contribute to education for girls in this newly independent country, through funding and supporting Ibba Girls Boarding School. It was established at the request of the local community in Ibba in South Sudan. As a founding trustee, I worked with John Benington, with community leaders and many others over more than a decade to create the school and gradually populate it to its full size of 360 primary and secondary school girl students. The school was designed and supported in ways which take account of a country emerging from war. The school not only provides valuable education for 360 girls but also contributes to institution-building as part of peace-building.

South Sudan: a war of independence followed by civil war and a new war in neighbouring Sudan

South Sudan is a large country with a relatively small population. It is about the size of France, though with very few roads or other infrastructure. Its estimated population is between 12 and 14 million people.

South Sudan has very varied landscapes from equatorial forests to savannah and extensive wetlands. It is rich in agriculture, forests, minerals and oil and in human culture including more than 60 languages. Economically it is one of the poorest countries in the world and has a long history of internal conflict. Consequently, South Sudan suffers from limited educational provision. In 2023 an estimated 2.8 million children were out of school, (GESS, 2023) which is about 70% of all school age children. More than 70% of the population above the age of 15 are illiterate, and for women the rate is estimated to be around 90%. Girls are particularly disadvantaged by poverty and the disruptive impacts of a violently divided society. Among girls, only an estimated 25% finish primary school and only an estimated 10% complete secondary school[1]. (Estimates are a common feature of countries in or emerging from war, due to population displacement, infrastructure destruction, low trust in government officials and low government expenditure on education.)

To understand the context of the long war in what became South Sudan, and the context of its education, a brief recap of history is useful. Dame Rosalind Marsden, former Ambassador to Sudan and South Sudan and currently Chatham House Fellow reported on the history of education in a webinar called History and Hope: Education in South Sudan, convened by The Open University (Reports | Friends of Ibba Girls School.) I draw substantially, and with her agreement, on that work to describe the history of South Sudan and education.

Sudan, including the territory of present-day South Sudan, was ruled by an Anglo-Egyptian colonial government, with Britain the senior partner, for the first half of the twentieth century. Initially, British forces fought wars of pacification in the south, which took longer than in the north. The British colonial authorities then sought to separate the predominantly Muslim, Arabic-speaking northern area from the South and for many years administered most of the South as “a closed district” to reduce the influence of Islam, the Arabic language, and northern Sudanese nationalist influences and, as British officials claimed at the time, to preserve the cultures of the southern peoples.

This difference in approach to North and South also applied to educational policy. In northern Sudan, the colonial authorities set up a government school system and

[1] Based on 2023 national education ministry figures and UN estimates of the South Sudan population.

higher education, but in southern Sudan, they outsourced education to Christian missionaries who opened schools and carried out evangelism based on geographical spheres of influence defined by the Governor-General. Italian Catholic missionaries established themselves in Bahr al Ghazal Province in the west, British Anglicans in Equatoria Province to the south, and American Presbyterians in Upper Nile to the east. This geographical division amongst the different Christian denominations is still largely in existence today, and still has ramifications. For example, the President Salva Kiir is Roman Catholic, while his main political rival, Riek Machar, is Presbyterian.

By the 1930s, the colonial government was showing more interest in southern education and created a system based on two types of schools: elementary schools that taught children in local languages, providing education linked to practical local needs, and intermediate schools with English as the language of instruction, aiming to train teachers, clerks and minor government officials. The run-up to Sudan's independence in 1956 also led to the establishment of southern Sudan's first secondary school, together with some agricultural, vocational and teacher training schools, in order that the south could participate in that decision-making.

After Sudan's independence, many foreign Christian missionaries were replaced by teachers from northern Sudan, with Arabic becoming the medium of instruction. However, schools were inaccessible to most people, and educational opportunities became even more limited due to Sudan's long-running civil wars between the northern and southern parts of the country between 1955 until 1972 and again between 1983 and 2005. This meant that generations of South Sudanese went into the bush to join the rebellion, or were displaced and they lost out on education. This war between Sudan and the independence movement of southern Sudan was one of the longest civil wars in history, with deaths, displacements and many refugees. The war was fought mainly in southern Sudan as well as in the Nuba mountains and Blue Nile areas of Sudan.

The war formally ended in 2005 with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, leading to a referendum on independence and then independence in 2011. After fifty years of war, the newly independent South Sudan had some of the worst human

development indicators in the world as well as having to deal with the aftermath of war.

Educational challenges resulted from poverty, poor governance, health problems, overcrowded classrooms, lack of qualified teachers, many of whom had barely completed elementary education, and the low level of teachers' salaries, resulting often in teacher absenteeism. The new government from 2011 made English the medium of instruction in schools (rather than Arabic). However, there was a shortage both of teachers who could teach in English and of English language teaching materials. Those South Sudanese who had managed to get a better education were often those who had grown up in the refugee camps in Kenya or Uganda and attended schools run by international NGOs.

These challenges are widespread but girls face additional obstacles because of gendered expectations, domestic responsibilities, and pressure to marry at an early age. Because of widespread poverty, the dowry associated with marriage can be an incentive for parents to marry off their young daughters. Prioritisation of boys' education often leads to girls being removed from school earlier, if a family cannot afford to send all their children to school. Insecurity and attack is also a deterrent, particularly for girls travelling a long way to school in rural areas. So girls are more likely to be enrolled later and removed from school earlier than boys. South Sudan has one of the lowest female literacy rates in the world. Few girls progress to secondary school. In 2021, only just over 11,000 completed secondary school (GESS, 2023). Girls' secondary enrolment rates in South Sudan are much lower than other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The number of young women going into the professions and other skilled roles and jobs is very small.

Education has been so disrupted that other educational initiatives are also needed (Pia, 2019). Fleeing for safety means that many children and adults have gaps in their education, have been unable to complete their studies, or are unable to concentrate in school. Former child soldiers may find conventional school unattractive and difficult. The traumas of war and violent conflict leave many students with post-traumatic stress.

The ravages of a long war, along with the lack of development over a century has left South Sudan with many challenges to overcome. As Daniel Akech of the

International Crisis Group noted in September 2024 "*Squabbling elites, combined with poverty and under-development, an overabundance of firearms and militias, a lack of infrastructure, decades-old grievances among disparate groups and climate catastrophes make up a long roll call of challenges.*" (Akech, 2024). To this, can now be added the pressures of ongoing war in neighbouring Sudan from April 2023, with many thousands of refugees fleeing southward to South Sudan, the rupture of oil revenues and disrupted cross-border trade.

It is in this very difficult context that Ibba Girls Boarding School aims to make a modest contribution to the building of South Sudan, based on a clear theory of change and the contribution of schools to peacebuilding.

Peace-building in South Sudan

Peace does not arrive in a nation with the signing of a peace agreement. In countries around the world, history shows that there are likely to be multiple flare-ups after war (Forrer & Kotsos, 2015) which can be exacerbated in contexts where institutions are too fragile or not functioning properly to enable the channelling of disputation and the dampening down of violence. This is evident in South Sudan.

It has been suggested that there are three phases in peace operations: peace-making, peacekeeping, and peacebuilding (Roberts & Bradley, 2006). This essay is about improving school education as a contribution to the third: fostering and strengthening fragile but existing peace arrangements through peacebuilding. Civil society as well as the state are central to peacebuilding for violently divided, post-war societies (Puljek-Shank & Verkoren 2017; Khalil and Hartley 2024).

Civil society is critical to peace-building in many ways. Churches, NGOs, community groups and others can help to rebuild the destroyed physical and social fabric in a country torn apart by violence. They can facilitate reconciliation processes on the ground and help to restore hope for the future. Lederach (1997) argues that peace in the long term is "*always rooted in the local people and their culture*."

For example, in relation to South Sudan, the Society of Sant' Egidio in Rome convened and encouraged peace talks between the warring factions nationally in 2018. Pope Francis has been active in encouraging reconciliation between the President (Salva Kiir) and Vice President (Riek Machar), who each command large

military and militaristic followings. He invited both men to spend time with him in Rome in 2019 and also made a visit in 2023 to Juba South Sudan with the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Moderator General of the Church of Scotland to encourage reconciliation.

Some peace work happens at the micro-level - informally in interactions between people, e.g. in families, market-places, workplaces and churches. The UnderSecretary for the Ministry of Peacebuilding in South Sudan, Hon. Pia Philip emphasises a key element of peacebuilding occurring in this way, including through schools (Pia, 2021).

Some of the work is at the meso level - peacebuilding through creating and sustaining institutions. This level of change is seen in many countries to be key (Unger, 1998; Gisselquist, 2014), with incremental change based on active learning. Institutions have a formal structure and purposes but they also include the informal social values, norms, practices and meanings which develop in organizational settings (Scott, 2013). This is partly about culture which is often more enduring than strategies and policies. Institutions, if they have appropriate norms and values, can create a degree of stability and predictability, can help to channel and address differences peaceably, and can foster hope for the future. Churches, schools, police forces and government departments are all examples of institutions which can facilitate (or undermine) the growth of peace out of fragility following war. For example, a school is an organization in that it teaches students, often with a formal curriculum, set of examinations and so on. It is also an institution which creates values and norms about, for example, how to resolve differences between students, how to behave in relation to teachers and other students, how staff should be treated, and what it means to be a citizen. Bishop Paride Taban created an institution which gave hope to South Sudanese people inside and outside the country through his work to establish a peace village at Kuron in Eastern Equatoria State (Ketelaar et al, 2024).

Our intention is that Ibba Girls Boarding School is an institution is a beacon of hope for girls' education in South Sudan (see also Benington, 2023).

This essay turns now to provide an illustrative case of institution-building through the design, the growing and the sustaining of Ibba Girls Boarding School.

Institution-building through Ibba Girls Boarding School

Ibba is a village located in dense equatorial forest in the south-west of South Sudan, not far from the borders with the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda. The school serves the much larger catchment area of the whole of Western Equatoria State, which is one of the ten states which constitute South Sudan and is an area the size of Scotland. Western Equatoria State is largely rural and most people are subsistence farmers. The state has suffered not only from the war of independence and the civil war but also the ravages of the Lords Resistance Army which had operated around northern Uganda, DRC and southern Sudan. Mercifully, in the last decade the state has been more peaceful than many other areas of South Sudan but there are still very distressing outbreaks of militia confrontations, murder and physical and sexual violence in particular localities in Western Equatoria State.

The original Idea for the school came from Bridget Nagomoro, in Ibba, who was one of very few girls in the area to complete secondary school let alone higher education. (Bridget's opportunity came through the Catholic Church.) As one of the few female local government commissioners in South Sudan, she worked with local community leaders to encourage support for a girls' school and also enlisted the help of Professor John Benington, of Warwick University. They had met in Juba at the workshops to prepare for independence. A UK charity, Friends of Ibba Girls School South Sudan was set up in 2011 in order to turn Bridget's dream into practical reality.

John has written in detail about the founding of IGBS through the careful work to turn an abstract and inspiring dream into practical and material reality while ensuring that key values about education are enshrined in the daily, termly and annual practices and activities at the school (Benington, 2023). This article uses those design principles to reflect on issues for education in the context of a country emerging from war where there are still brutal outbreaks of violence.

The design of IGBS was very carefully thought through and much discussed in meetings with the community in Ibba on various in-person visits by John and later with a larger group of FIGS trustees through visits and online communication. Ibba Girls Boarding School (IGBS) is a community school (not a private school or a government school) and is focused on girls, given the weight of evidence about the

contribution of girls' education to development. Dollar for dollar, girls' education has multiple ripple effects into society and the economy. Education for boys is also important (as well as for child soldiers and so on) but FIGS and the community focused on girls given its limited resources. It is a school based on Christian values but open to students of all faiths and none.

Crucially, it is both a primary and secondary school together. Analysis of the limited statistics available, along with local community knowledge, indicated that many girls – even if they get to school in the first place – tend to drop out of school at or before the end of primary because of the family's need for domestic help on the land, in the house and with younger siblings, and also because of traditional customs of girls being married and having children at an early age, often shortly after puberty. IGBS therefore creates a bridge to secondary school, reducing dropout as girls and parents see older students go straight on to secondary school with its demonstrable benefits. Parents are encouraged to keep their daughter in school right through to the end of secondary, with national secondary examinations. IGBS adds to the small cadre of young women completing secondary school. Education at IGBS is free, though parents and guardians pay a modest contribution in money or in kind, towards the students' living expenses. This is to ensure that marginalised girls, from rural areas, have opportunities for quality education, regardless of parental status or background.

IGBS is a boarding school. Its large catchment area means a day school is not feasible, but in addition, a residential school enables girls to study without competing domestic demands on their time and attention, (which can often cause girls to fall behind and then drop out of school) and with safety and security.

Furthermore a residential school enables co-curricular activities outside formal classroom time which foster personal development, leadership and understanding of others. Music, dance and drama, debates, soccer, a peace club, a chess club, Sunday worship – all can contribute to building confidence, empowerment and life skills as well as empathy for others. The bringing together of students and staff from across Western Equatoria State also means a range of first languages and cultures, so girls develop understanding of cultures and practices beyond their own.

The school has 360 residential places for teaching and learning, in nine classes from mid-primary (approximately aged 10) to the end of secondary. Many more girls deserve school but the tough decision was made to have 40 maximum in a class in order to offer high-quality, student-centred teaching (in contrast to many schools with more than 100 squashed into a class with the teacher boxed into a small space in front of the blackboard where, in that context, only rote learning is possible). The classes start at Primary 4 – an age when it is felt that girls, with matron and teacher support, can cope with being away from their families for a whole term (or longer in some cases).

In a boarding school, the roles of matrons and the Senior Woman Teacher (responsible for safeguarding and for pastoral care) are critical. Some girls have suffered or witnessed violence; nightmares and bedwetting can be signs of psychosocial stress. Many have experienced the displacements of war, fragmented families, loss of land and witnessed violence. Evaluation in 2018 found that a high proportion of girls lived in families without their natural father, in part an indication of the disruption of war.

IGBS has a well-designed built environment, with high-quality buildings on sound environmental principles, created by Malcolm Worby, an architect experienced in several African countries (though South Sudan was a first for him). Drawing on local knowledge from the community about the terrain, the soil, the climate, the trees and more, Malcolm helped to design and develop a green school, with solar-powered water and electricity. The four water taps on the campus were a first for this community. The buildings make use of existing shade, aiming to keep buildings as cool as possible in the equatorial heat and to withstand heavy equatorial rains. The classrooms are furnished with a desk and chair for each student, which sounds very basic but are in sharp contrast to many schools in South Sudan.

The donation of land by local community leaders means that the school has more than 40 hectares of land, some of which is used for a modest school farm. Students learn both farming and entrepreneurial skills through growing some of their own food, and contributing to the longer-term sustainability of the school. IGBS school uses the motto “learning by the pen and the hoe” to indicate that both academic and vocational skills are important.

School governance also fosters institution-building. A Board of Trustees guards the values and overall strategy of the school, the land and its assets while the Board of Governors helps and advises the Head Teacher and school leadership team in the day-to-day running of the school. The parent-teacher association supports the school, and the school has a strong elected prefect system with girls closely involved in some aspects of school leadership.

Governance has been a steep upward journey over a decade. Because there is so little in the way of existing institutions that IGBS Trustees and Governors have had to learn what is involved in guiding a school. Such skills will also be relevant in other settings as the country develops.

FIGS has commissioned Windle Trust International (a UK charity with a strong reputation and decades of experience in educational provision in eastern Africa) as its agent and partner. WTI provides regular training sessions for all these governance bodies, to strengthen their understanding and skills in how best to help the school thrive. WTI also provides technical financial, managerial and HR support to the school, from its South Sudan offices, providing the close support needed for a large-scale school.

All these design features have a concern with institution building – creating a school which develops knowledge, cultures and practices which can be learnt from and used in other settings to help the country overcome its legacy (and ongoing traumas) of war and violent division, and which help to foster peaceful ways of managing disputes between different people.

Spreading the impact of IGBS

IGBS is a drop in the ocean in terms of the vast scale of need in South Sudan but it explicitly aims to be a beacon of hope and inspiration to other schools across the country, showing how high quality but accessible education can contribute to improving educational standards and practices. Some teacher professional development workshops involve teachers from other local schools and there is interest at national level in how the lessons from IGBS can be spread. In that sense, it shares demonstration qualities with the Kuron peace village of Bishop Paride Taban.

The school aims to be a hub for economic and social development. Teachers, matrons, the school nurse, the cooks, cleaners, security staff and ground staff all receive a regular wage and access to some on-the-job training and development. They become accustomed to employment (still relatively rare in a subsistence economy) and are able to use their wages to ripple out the beneficial effects of IGBS, e.g. supporting not only their families but ensuring that relatives' children can go to school. A FIGS evaluation in 2019 found that the five cooks alone, between them supported 30 children (their own and their relatives) in other schools on their wages.

Financially, the school is largely supported through Friends of Ibba Girls School (FIGS), which has supporters and donors around the world (see Friends of Ibba Girls School). Its Chair is Chris Trott, who has substantial experience of South Sudan, having been UK Ambassador there, and now UK Ambassador to the Holy See at the Vatican in Rome. There is close and regular communication with the school staff and its trustees and governors, as well as with WTI, ensuring that funds are well-targeted on girls' education. FIGS and WTI provide advice where relevant, given the expertise within both charities. FIGS and IGBS also benefit from advice and ideas (about teaching, buildings and agriculture) from Solidarity with South Sudan. The previous Principal of Solidarity Teacher Training College was a founding IGBS Trustee as is now the current Principal[2].

Education in a country emerging from war

Education is not automatically a benefit in a violently divided society. A Unicef report (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000) is a reminder that school enrolment practices, the curriculum and the behaviour of teachers can, in some contexts, reinforce rather than overcome division (as was seen in Northern Ireland at the time of the Troubles). However, if well-constructed, education can be a force for overcoming some (not all) of the challenges of war, in myriad ways. A school creates educated citizens, less at the mercy of demagogues and authoritarian figures because they have knowledge along with the ability to reason and to critically question inflammatory exhortations to violence. Debate, argument and the culture of curiosity can help to channel deeply-held differences into collaborative actions to address complex problems rather than

[2] Solidarity is a model of ministry and collaboration among women and men religious and the laity in serving the poor, established at the request of Catholic bishops in South Sudan.

blaming “the other”. Educated girls are less vulnerable to coercive control and domestic violence (though not immune). They are more likely to be healthy and if they have children to have healthier children who are more likely to go to school. They use their academic knowledge to help others in their family and community. For example at IGBS, evaluation research demonstrates that girls teach their siblings in the holidays, help parents read medicine instructions, and improve domestic hygiene. Their socio-emotional skills are valuable in mediation, education and other roles. Longer-term some girls at IGBS may go into helping professions such as midwifery, medicine or teaching, or start their own businesses. The ripple effects are and will be legion and long-term. As Wangari Maathai, the Kenyan Nobel Peace Prize winner, says: “*You cannot enslave a mind that knows itself. That understands itself. That values itself.”*

Schools, though, are not only about educating students, critical and central though that is. They are also institutions, which create and spread meanings, understandings, values, practices, and a sense of what is reasonable and unreasonable in society. South Sudan has few properly-functioning institutions, the legacy of earlier colonial neglect, under-resourcing and the effects of two generations of war. Building well-functioning institutions focused on creating a better society increases the stability of society. Schools can be an important part of that jigsaw. They are often buffeted by outbreaks of violence, instability, a weak economy, climate change and more, but dedicated governors, staff and students, along with external support from NGOs like FIGS and Windle Trust International can help them make inroads following the devastation of war.

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