

Understanding Effective Collaboration
Within A Diverse Community

Lessons Learned from the
South Sudan Concerned Citizens (SSCC)
Petition Initiative

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Understanding Effective Collaboration Within a Diverse Community:

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I. Abstract/Summary

The South Sudanese community in Denver, Colorado, reflects the same rich diversity of tribal and regional identities that one finds in South Sudan. In South Sudan, these divisions have been exploited by political leaders to factionalize the country and compete for power. In Denver, these divisions have sometimes produced tension and devaluation of others, as well as competition over community resources. However, a small group of diverse Denver South Sudanese community members took it upon themselves to work across these differences in order to develop a common voice within the US political system and lobby their representatives for action on US policy toward South Sudan. This report attempts to capture the nature of their successful collaboration within their diverse community. It begins with a review of the nature of their diverse community and the struggles that many diverse communities face, including the challenges of a North American immigrant community. It identifies characteristics that allowed collaboration to be nurtured, and summarizes lessons learned for other communities facing similar challenges. Finally, next steps and new activities for further promoting community are considered.

II. A Diverse Community with Characteristic Tensions

The metropolitan Denver South Sudanese community is similar to other North American South Sudanese diaspora communities. Community members have come from all of the tribes and regions of South Sudan, including Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Azande, Fertit, Moru, and other smaller tribes; from the regions of Upper Nile, Bahr-el-Ghazal, and Equatoria; and from communities of South Sudanese in other East African countries. Its primary community organization is the Association of South Sudanese in Colorado (ASSC).

Many South Sudanese will describe their identity as “compound”: everyone belongs to a clan, a tribe, and also shares a South Sudanese identity. Because they were historically mistreated together as South Sudanese by the Arab Muslim Sudanese, this made their common African Christian South Sudanese identity salient. However once the external enemy was gone, discussions about the nature of their new country revealed different narratives. Some felt they should be the rulers and own it; others felt they had also fought for it and so should not now be excluded. This is not just tensions between the two largest tribal identities, but also a feeling by those of other tribal identities that they have been excluded (e.g., Equatorians). These same conversations carried over into the diaspora communities, and many North American diaspora communities of South Sudanese also broke apart.

In 2013, when violence against the Nuers erupted in Juba, the two largest communities could not come together in the diaspora. Though similar tensions also strained the Denver South Sudanese community,

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they believe they still maintained a unity. Intergroup tensions were most visible in the community organization.

The community organization, as well as other community groups such as church communities, has suffered from tensions among factions. At one point in 2016, there were two leaders of the Colorado organization, causing a schism within it. Eventually some of the elders of the community were able to open a channel of communication between the factions. They emphasized the need to unite as a community and engaged with the leadership of the two factions. It was a lengthy process of engagement, lasting for six months, which mobilized the communities and contained the radicals in both factions. They focused on developing a well-documented process for self-governance, and also engaged in traditional methods of reconciliation. Eventually, new leadership was elected representing a united community.

III. Collaboration on a Joint Initiative: Context for Workshop on Lessons Learned

In 2017, the situation in South Sudan continued to deteriorate. A small and diverse subset of the leadership in metropolitan Denver's South Sudanese community felt that it was critical to raise the salience of the conflict and issues in South Sudan in the eyes of US policymakers. This group, informally called "the Group of Nine," had worked together once before, to arrange for a briefing of the community on the peace talks going on in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Despite the effort and the risks of working together, they felt the need was greater. They drafted a petition (attached) and delivered this to Colorado's US Senators Michael Bennett and Cory Gardner, in late November 2017.

Once the Conflict Resolution Institute at the University of Denver learned of this effort, they became intrigued to understand more fully what had catalyzed and fostered this atypical collaboration. They invited the members of the petition-drafting group to a workshop in December 2017 to explore this process further, and to attempt to document it and any lessons learned.

Several outcomes were sought. Leadership wanted to better unite the South Sudanese people in metropolitan Denver despite their differences within the community, and try to find a common ground and ideas to bring the community together. The common goal for the group was peace. Additionally, there was and still is a need to create more awareness on the crisis happening in South Sudan. The South Sudan Concerned Citizens (SSCC) group sought peace in the South Sudanese community in Colorado and in South Sudan, and sought to strengthen their group as well as learn best practices for their development. SSCC was also curious as to what the community in Denver could do to promote a peaceful resolution to the conflict in South Sudan as well as to develop solutions for some of South Sudan's other problems.

IV. Characteristics of Communities Struggling with Division

Participants first shared the context that had compelled them to come together to take action.

Many communities struggle with division. In South Sudan, these are mainly tribal and regional groupings. When feeling politically threatened, people run to their tribe or identity group. Different cultures and ways of life may not be respected. Not all groups may have a culture of respect for other tribes. Cultural biases may play into tensions.

The legacies of war are many, and continue to be felt, both in South Sudan and in the diaspora. War tears people apart – it erodes both communities and families. Death comes early. There are many widows and orphans. War and conflict produces a bitterness just waiting for a target to be directed at. This may emerge as a lack of remorse, and/or a lack of moral judgement. A culture of rape exists, where women are victimized by abusers, and then victimized again by tribe, community and family. Girls become prostitutes if they don't know where they come from. Boys become members of militia groups. Hundreds of thousands have not gone to school or had an education. Lives continue to be disrupted.

Some have been able to emigrate to other countries, mainly to the United States and Canada, as well as to Australia, Norway, Finland and the UK. However, as immigrants in their new countries, they often feel they are forgotten by the larger society. A large percentage of Denver refugees have limited education. Some are barely able to make ends meet. Many parents cannot read in English, so cannot help their children with schoolwork. Expectations in the US school system are unfamiliar. With a lack of education, they can be manipulated more easily. It also sows division within the community, as those who are not educated are jealous of those who are.

In addition to concerns about lack of education and livable wages for many in the diaspora community, there are also concerns about a loss of identity. Concern was expressed that some youth don't know South Sudanese history, especially of the independence movement. A gap is widening between children and parents, and they have no common ground. Many expressed concerns about youth getting into trouble.

Though many divisions remain among the Denver diaspora community, many would like to see a common identity be nurtured. One commonly expressed desired was that the new generation coming up not follow in the same past divisions, but rather feel unity as South Sudanese. A few elders may be inclined to maintain historic divisions, while other elders and new leadership would like to emphasize South Sudanese identity. One concern expressed was a sense that certain groups may feel the need to dominate the others here, and a few individuals can escalate divisions. However, though sometimes divided, they come together for community events like funerals. Loss of family and grieving has brought those in the Denver community together.

Many felt that uniting in the US is important and crucial. The children growing up in this generation need to know about the South Sudanese struggle for independence but need to be more united than the previous generations and grow up with a South Sudanese identity. For these reasons, it is important to identify how South Sudanese diaspora communities can effectively come together as a united community.

V. Factors Contributing to Collaboration/Lessons Learned

It was widely agreed and acknowledged that the conflict in South Sudan was a political one that became tribal. The conflict further escalated because the militias “did not behave like soldiers but like savages.” Motives for revenge killings were further manipulated to serve political goals.

It was also recognized that in the US context, these political and tribal divisions further weakened their community. This South Sudanese diaspora community needed to be united to have a voice as one community among many in the US. Two events highlighted this need to foster unity: the Denver

community organization losing a grant because the local community was divided, and the recognition that to effectively lobby their congressional representatives they had to be unified.

Through reviewing the characteristics and processes of the South Sudanese community in Denver, several Lessons Learned were identified. These are outlined below.

Elders and Leaders Should Lead in Bridging

As in traditional South Sudanese culture, elders have a role that is respected and can play a bridging role. When this community experienced divisions, a group of elders took leadership to bridge factions; they were able to talk to both sides without fear. Elders and the community promoted and emphasized the value of coming together. Also, specific individual leaders took responsibility for stepping back and accepting the community's procedure (see next section) and gracefully conciliating. Leaders recognized that part of leadership was to demonstrate the importance of bridging differences, uniting the community, and working together. To reinforce their rapprochement, they drew on community traditions for reconciliation and valuing this willingness to reconcile.

Develop Shared and Accepted Procedures; Isolate Divisive Voices

In addition to shared rituals that could unite the community, it was helpful to have a fair process for community affairs that all would agree to, and to jointly develop these accepted procedures. It helped to identify acceptable behavior as well as behavior that was not acceptable. Bylaws were developed for community organizations that encourage community commitment and responsibility as the 'dues' for having voice, that regulate numbers of people and how people can attend meetings, vote, etc, and sanction people for causing problems. It was recognized that all bore a responsibility to isolate more extreme and divisive voices, including that poor behavior needed to be condemned by elders. Above all, it is important to develop and maintain communication channels.

Structure Engagement as a Unified Community

A unified community can be supported in several ways. It was felt important to emphasize the commonality of US citizenship. This can be reinforced by engaging in joint initiatives as South Sudanese Americans, such as this effort to develop a petition. Common personal and cultural values can also be emphasized, such as traditions of reconciliation, and the importance of church. It is helpful to see the community as family, and recognize what is personal and what is politics.

Diaspora communities also should be aware of how the tribal identity 'game' is played and can pull in those in the local community. It was important in Denver to not allow politicians and leaders from South Sudan to meet with different factions of the diaspora in the city separately, but rather to insist that the Denver community would meet as "South Sudanese" with these visitors. It is important to recognize that those South Sudanese both locally and from national centers of power (Juba, Washington DC, Ottawa) who want to perpetuate division (and/or who benefit from it) will be threatened by the successful unity of communities like Denver's South Sudanese.

Use a Unified Voice to Create Change

Motivation to create change within (and provided by) the US political context gave hope and motivation for the participants on this initiative to work together. The urgency of getting the conflict in South Sudan back into the US public eye provided motivation, as did the possible influence the US might have on the

conflict. It was recognized that a united voice would have more impact. The US is both organized and mobilized via communities; if you don't have a community, it is difficult to accomplish anything or even be recognized.

Thus this petition initiative to the US government came about for several reasons:

- More awareness about the South Sudan crisis needed to be brought into US mainstream media. For example, the increased suffering of South Sudanese people includes depleting the elders' population who are responsible for the preservation of the culture, thus the culture's strongest moral and ethical frameworks are at risk.
- There was a realization that as citizens of the US, they have to exercise their rights to have their voices heard
- One avenue to make their voices heard was to lobby their representatives in the US to speak against the atrocities being committed in South Sudan
- The weight of the support from the community is a powerful tool and is needed to further move the petition forward

VI. Future Goals and Activities

In reviewing their progress and the accomplishments of their joint initiative, the community felt energized. Ideas for future activities took many forms, including calls to achieve the following:

A. Spread News about Successful Collaboration and Community Unity

This petition initiative is something important for other to hear about, so spreading the word about it is a first step. People can spread the word of how the Denver South Sudanese community has achieved collaboration and unity, and make an effort to document the success of the Colorado community. Further, they can be ambassadors on managing conflict effectively and provide hope to other communities.

B. Provide Educational Opportunities to Counter Ignorance and Susceptibility to Conflicts

There is a need to make education a priority, as ignorance feeds and escalates divisions. General education needs further support and reinforcement, so people are informed and engage in critical thinking.

More specific education related to current events and politics is also needed. People need to be prepared so that they will not be manipulated by politicians. Provide people with opportunities for information sharing and for learning about current complexities on latest developments. One idea is to have briefings on what is happening in South Sudan, done as an integrated community rather than organized separately and confined to separate tribal sources. Make these briefings available to all in the community.

C. Provide Training and Resources in Conflict Resolution and Trauma-Healing

It is important to learn how to handle the dynamics that make unity within the community difficult. This includes conflictual interactions, both in person and on social media. One step is to have conflict resolution workshops to learn more about how to coexist in peace in the US: for leaders, for

the entire community, and also specifically for youth. These can provide alternatives to coercive communication, threats, and violence.

We should also recognize the role of community trauma in how people handle conflict and develop relationships. Despite all that we are doing that is constructive, they still have pain, and we have to find a way to transform this, perhaps through trauma-healing workshops. One idea would be to learn best practice methods from other communities that have experienced conflict, and how to recognize and address the role of trauma, i.e. be trauma-informed. Possible ways to do this could draw on networks of women, former combatants, etc., and on people from other conflict locations such as Rwanda or Northern Ireland.

D. Create a More Inclusive Community

There are many ways a more inclusive community can be built. Getting the two main tribes to work together may still leave out the smaller tribes; thus attention must be paid to addressing their grievances and needs also. Ideas and resources can be found to build a network to minimize youth and intergenerational tensions as well as challenges within gender groups. Children should be integrated into the community more, and in a more proactive way. Bringing together all of these groups lets them know they are a part of the community. They feel they can have a voice and an investment in the united community. They also can convey to others back in South Sudan who feel voiceless that it is possible to have a South Sudanese community where they can have a voice.

E. Connect Community Models Developed in North America to Conflict in South Sudan

Fostering South Sudanese communities in North America with better relations is a goal in itself. However, lessons learned may be transferable. It may be that opportunities can be created to discuss how to address the conflict in South Sudan, by first starting with how to address discrimination and injustice here in North America. We can explore how to create a peaceful nation by developing models elsewhere of peaceful communities. Similar ideas are being explored through various diaspora networks, such as the one that emerged from the AFRECS 2018 conference in Denver.

For further information, please contact