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South Sudanese Youth Agency in a Time of COVID-19: Insights on Youth, Leadership & The Opportunity of Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'African youth' has been and continues to be mis-characterised by connotations of violent and disruptive tendencies. The picture of young people who are inherently entangled in different forms of political violence is often overhyped and it overshadows their commendable contributions to peace, security, and development in society. Worse still are those who come from contexts of protracted conflict like South Sudan, where the chequered political security history blurs the potential and actual contributions of its vibrant, young population to peace and development. During the vicissitude wrought by COVID-19, however, the overlooked and underestimated youth of South Sudan emerged as innovators and self-empowered political actors. Young South Sudanese created new ways of spreading awareness and sensitising the population about the virus, including protective measures. They also engaged the transitional government on pending state issues (peace process). Based on this background, this leadership commentary x-rays the initiatives of *Junub Open Space* (JOS) and *Ana Taban* in response to the COVID-19 outbreak as examples of youth leadership

in South Sudan. It then goes a step further to assess their leadership effectiveness and draws valuable leadership insights that could inform youth inclusion strategies.

Setting the Scene: The Situation in South Sudan

Leadership theory emphasizes that context matters.¹ It is important then to situate the South Sudan state and South Sudanese youth leadership within the broader international political economy landscape. In doing so, we can locate them on different sides of the same neo-liberalist coin.

On one side of the coin, the application of the 'one-size-fits all' liberal peacebuilding model in South Sudan has produced a 'political marketplace'² where the political settlement was the outcome of a leader-centred transactional process.³ The "gun class" elite were appeased with material incentives and position-based power in exchange for agreeing to cease violence.⁴ In the transitional period (from February 2020, later extended to 2024 and then to 2026) public goods have been mutated into private ones, entrenching corruption and

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¹ Sonja Theron, "Power and Influence in Post-Secession South Sudan: A Leadership Perspective on Nation-Building," October 20, 2021, <https://repository.globethics.net/handle/20.500.12424/4081820>.

² Alex De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

³ 'Funmi Olonisakin, *Reconceptualising Leadership for Effective Peacemaking in Africa* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2015), https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/52469/Olonisakin_Reconceptualising_2015.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

⁴ Majak DÁgoot, "South Sudan's Stability Hinges on Controlling the 'Gun Class,'" Africa Center for Strategic Studies, August 24, 2021, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/south-sudan-stability-gun-class/>.

the misappropriation of resources. This has led to weak public institutions and underfunding of social services and development initiatives.⁵ Further, the state governs through entrenched surveillance over communication and has control over convenings. The South Sudan National Security Service (NSS) monitors the movements and phone conversations of suspected 'dissidents' and is the body that approves civil society meetings.

These have profound implications on state-society relations as the South Sudanese people bear the brunt of this neglect and are disempowered to act. With overarching surveillance and the real (or perceived) threat of coercive power, there is a pervasive climate of fear, making genuine civic participation a challenging endeavour. South Sudanese youth, also in a transitional period from childhood to adulthood, have limited opportunities to actualize their potential, sometimes leading them to enlist into militia groups, perpetuating the cycle of instability.

On the other side of the coin, young people are connected to global culture through the internet. The rapid development and penetration of information communication technologies (ICT) has dramatically transformed the landscape of youth culture, socialization, learning, and political engagement. Among other things, it has exposed them to 'universal' liberal principles of democracy, rights, and justice.

This exposure is both empowering and frustrating. While it has provided a pathway to active citizenship, South Sudanese youth remain constrained by lack of access to basic resources and political repression. The youth are then left wanting and in 'waithood' as they are caught in between what is possible and what is attainable. Yet, waithood does not denote inaction. As this commentary will demonstrate, waithood can inspire a sense of vitality in young people who invent new ways of being and engaging with society.

Politics and Pandemics: COVID- 19 and the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity

The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with the formation of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU), a key step in the implementation of the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). However, the beginning of the transitional period was marred with numerous challenges, as the R-TGoNU grappled with political disagreements and human development deficits. The country was also confronting the risk of famine and was expecting a cholera outbreak.⁶

At the outset of the pandemic, several experts made doom and gloom prophesies on the disastrous implications of COVID-19 for sub-Saharan African countries. States in the Global North prioritized self-preservation by isolating, hence disrupted global supply chains and foreign aid. This led to presumptions, underpinned by imperial rhetoric, that the dependent, disease-ridden and poverty-stricken continent would barely survive.⁷ Soon, sensationalized reports with click-bait titles like, "South Sudan has more Vice-Presidents than ventilators,"⁸ gained popularity online.

As of 15th July 2020, South Sudan confirmed 2,153 COVID-19 cases, with 41 deaths. There were concerns that the situation would drastically deteriorate due to poor enforcement and adherence to the guidelines provided by the World Health Organization,⁹ the Ministry of Health, and the South Sudan National COVID-19 Steering Committee. Most local markets were still overcrowded with people running businesses as usual. Socialization practices persisted despite directives to adhere to physical distance measures. A lack of trust in the state was palpable. Evening rituals of playing cards, sipping tea and smoking shisha remained the norm. This was further perpetuated by the misconceptions about the virus including that it could

⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "South Sudanese Political Elites Illicitly Diverting Millions of US Dollars," *OHCHR*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2021/09/south-sudanese-political-elites-illicitly-diverting-millions-us-dollars>

⁶ Global Network Against Food Crises, "Global Report on Food Crises 2020," *ReliefWeb*, accessed September 13, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-report-food-crises-2020-enar>.

⁷ David Mwambari, "The Pandemic Can Be a Catalyst for Decolonisation in Africa," *Al Jazeera*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/4/15/the-pandemic-can-be-a-catalyst-for-decolonisation-in-africa>

⁸ Harshmeet Singh, "South Sudan Has More Vice Presidents than Ventilators - Is Africa Ready to Fight Coronavirus?," YouTube video, 9:05, May 14, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-syfKbCs2bk>.

⁹ World Health Organization, "WHO COVID-19 Dashboard," accessed September 13, 2024, <https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/cases?n=c>.

not survive the hot weather of South Sudan; and underlined the importance of continuous sensitization.¹⁰

South Sudanese Youth Agency: Leadership during Crisis

Even with limited resources, African people across the continent demonstrated resilience and an aptitude for creative and collective problem-solving.¹¹ The COVID crisis saw the emergence of “frugal and low-tech innovations”¹² from health workers, students, researchers, information and technology (ICT) professionals, religious leaders, traditional healers, social entrepreneurs, artists and youth groups.¹³

Though they were precluded from social, economic, cultural, and political structures of power, young South Sudanese continued to create and consolidate spaces to exercise and exhibit their agency. This commentary focuses on two youth groups- *Junub* (South Sudan) Open Space and *Ana Taban* (I am tired) who emerged to respond to the pandemic by initiating and implementing COVID-19 prevention, mitigation and management measures.¹⁴

Junub Open Space (JOS) is a youth-led organisation that offers solutions to social issues through digital and technological innovations and social entrepreneurship. During COVID, they initiated an innovative information sharing tool called the Blue Messenger Bicycle (BMB).¹⁵ The bicycle used megaphones, amplifiers, and batteries to pass information on the coronavirus in the neighbourhoods of Juba, reaching up to 200 households in a day. The BMB initially started with three fully mounted bicycles but received a donation of 15 bicycles

from the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Health to increase its fleet and broaden its reach.¹⁶ They also worked with teachers to set up an e-learning platform and offline internet server filled with educational content to support high school candidates due to sit for their senior leaving certificate. Furthermore, they used bitcoin cash for fundraising to support the provision of basic needs to underprivileged and displaced persons.¹⁷

Towards the same cause, *Ana Taban*, a youth artist collective initiated the #wagifcorona (stop corona) campaign, which communicated preventive measures offline through wall mural paintings and virtually through social media. The artist collective had previously used social media campaigns such as #AnaTaban expressing frustration about the armed conflict and advocating for peace in South Sudan; #Bloodshedfree2017¹⁸ calling for an end to the renewed violence in 2016; and the #SouthSudanIsWatching¹⁹ campaign that engaged several African dignitaries during the High-level Revitalization Forum (HLRF) in February 2018.²⁰ Ana Taban also released a video online, which called out the government for failing to fulfil their promise of peace, stability and development in the post-independence period. Both groups also engaged in soap and mask making, which they distributed widely in the neighbourhoods in Juba and through their networks in refugee camps.

Despite various structural obstacles in South Sudan, JOS and Ana Taban proved to be innovative, resourceful, and effective in a time of crisis. Relying on expert power, they employed relevant skills to create awareness, share information and produce and disseminate COVID-prevention materials. This demonstrated servant leadership, namely leadership rooted in the desire to

¹⁰ Saferworld, “‘People Are Living a Normal Life’: Challenging the Myths of COVID-19 in South Sudan,” *Saferworld*, accessed October 14, 2024,

<https://www.saferworld-global.org/en-stories-of-change/a-people-are-living-a-normal-life-a-challenging-the-myths-of-covid-19-in-south-sudan>.

¹¹ Bol, “Frugal Innovation during the COVID-19 Crisis: Examples from East Africa - INCLUDE Platform.”

¹² Ibid

¹³ Chimwemwe, Fabiano, “From Crisis to Opportunity: COVID-19 and Innovation in Africa,” *African Leadership Centre*, accessed October 14, 2024,

<https://www.africanleadershipcentre.org/index.php/covid-19-research/651-from-crisis-to-opportunity-covid-19-and-innovation-in-africa>.

¹⁴ Mamadou Diouf, “Engaging Postcolonial Cultures: African Youth and Public Space,” *African Studies Review* 46, no. 2 (September 2003): 1–12,

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0002020600030276>.

¹⁵ Impact Capital, “Resilience in Organising During the Time of COVID-19 in South Sudan,” *ImpactCap*, accessed

September 13, 2024,

<https://www.impactcap.co/post/resilience-in-organising-during-the-time-of-covid-19-in-south-sudan>.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Interview with Emmanuel Lobijo, by Margaret LoWilla, Juba, 28/08/2021

¹⁸ Anataban South Sudan, “#SouthSudan #BloodShedFree2017 #Anataban Campaign,” *Video, YouTube*, January 2, 2017,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jx5a88osF2U>.

¹⁹ “#SouthSudanIsWatching,” X (formerly Twitter), accessed September 13, 2024,

<https://x.com/hashtag/southsudaniswatching?lang=en>.

²⁰ “Joint Statement of The South Sudanese Parties and Stakeholders on the Second Phase of the High-Level Revitalization Forum, and Recommitment to the Cessation of Hostilities,” February 17, 2018,

<https://southsudan.igad.int/index.php/press/324-joint-statement-of-the-south-sudanese-parties-and-stakeholders-on-the-second-phase-of-the-high-level-revitalization-forum-and-recommitment-to-the-cessation-of-hostilities>.

serve and facilitate the growth and well-being of followers.²¹ Their efforts towards education and humanitarian assistance illustrated their commitment to service in ensuring the welfare and empowerment of their communities.

However, it would be an overstatement to hail the two youth groups as South Sudan's salvation against COVID. In fact, it is still uncertain why the impact of COVID-19 was not as devastating in African countries as earlier predicted.²² Speculations around this include that Africans have enhanced resilience due to vast experience in navigating comorbidities such as HIV, Ebola, tuberculosis, among others,²³ socio-cultural practices of community-based care,²⁴ physically engaging livelihood activities,²⁵ and a large youth demographic.²⁶

Yet, recognizing the effectiveness of youth leadership remains pertinent, as it establishes their capabilities and competence to assume positions of power and engage in formal decision-making. In the face of the pandemic's harsh challenges—marked by fragile institutions, limited access to basic services, and minimal resources—youth groups did not default to the self-serving politics associated with state leaders. Instead, they focused on addressing the needs of their communities, affirming them as servant leaders.

Post-Pandemic Woes: Resistance and Repression

In the aftermath of COVID-19, while the country no longer had to confront the health emergency, the socio-

political situation deteriorated and state-society cleavages deepened even further. Several of the previous leadership failures have remained prevalent. For example, the slow implementation of the agreement remains a critical issue. In fact, on September 13th, 2024, the R-TGoNU announced an extension of the transitional period²⁷—the second 24-month extension since the transitional government was formed in 2020. Though the announcement was unsurprising, it has raised concerns around the state's legitimacy and ability to consolidate peace and democracy.²⁸

One could argue that South Sudan seemingly in a perpetual state of transition is trapped in 'waithood,' unable to quite realize its full potential of statehood.²⁹ Alternatively it could be argued that in transition the administration can maintain its hold on power and assure its own survival, resonating with the view that, "governance is more a matter of seamanship and less one of navigation – that is, staying afloat rather than going somewhere."³⁰

Meanwhile, a shift of focus from the formal arena of power is a story of sustained youth agency. JOS has organized various youth and women empowerment trainings covering a broad range of topics such as solar panel installation, use of sustainable fuel sources, practical skills training for recent university graduates and community storytelling workshops. They have hosted #outofschool learning for children and girl empowerment spaces to discuss sexual and

²¹ Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Power of Servant Leadership*, ed. Larry C. Spears (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1998)

²² Lucy-Joy Wachira et al., "Why Are COVID-19 Effects Less Severe in Sub-Saharan Africa? Moving More and Sitting Less May Be a Primary Reason," *Global Health Journal* (2022), [https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9042414/].

²³ Bibi-Aisha Wadvalla, "How Africa Has Tackled Covid-19," *BMJ*, July 16, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2830>.

²⁴ African Cities Research Consortium, *Community-Led Responses to COVID-19 in Informal Settlements of Nairobi: Lessons from the Field*, African Cities Research Consortium, June 2022, https://www.african-cities.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ACRC_Covid-Collective_Community-led-responses-in-Nairobi.pdf.

²⁵ Wachira et. al. "Why Are COVID-19 Effects Less Severe in Sub-Saharan Africa? Moving More and Sitting Less May Be a Primary Reason."

²⁶ Binta Zahra Diop, Marieme Ngom, Clémence Pougé Biyong, and John N. Pougé Biyong, "The Relatively Young

and Rural Population May Limit the Spread and Severity of COVID-19 in Africa: A Modelling Study," *medRxiv*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.05.07.20093174>.

²⁷ Benjamin Tapkiny, "South Sudan Extends Transitional Government by 2 Years, Pushing Election to 2026," *Anadolu Agency*, September 14, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/south-sudan-extends-transitional-government-by-2-years-pushing-election-to-2026/3329855>.

²⁸ Margaret LoWilla, "Historic Elections in South Sudan," *Africans for the Horn*, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://africansforthehorn.org/historic-elections-in-south-sudan/>.

²⁹ Robert H. Jackson and Carl G. Rosberg, "Why Africa's Weak States Persist: The Empirical and the Juridical in Statehood," *World Politics*, vol. 35, October 1982, <https://www.african.cam.ac.uk/system/files/documents/jackson.pdf>.

³⁰ De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power*.

reproductive health and rights. Furthermore, they have produced short films on social issues.³¹

Ana Taban have continued their peace and political work through various forms of creative expression including through music, art exhibitions, festivals and painting wall murals. Their campaigns have expanded to include #NebniSawa (we are united) #NarfaSoutna (we raise our voices) #ShababSalam (youth for peace) #AbinuMataKasuru (build don't break). They have received international recognition for their work at the intersection of art and peacebuilding. Additionally, they have conducted trainings on leadership, mediation and conflict and organized community clean ups through an initiative called Ana Taban *Jua Hilla* (Ana Taban in the neighbourhoods).³²

South Sudanese youth more broadly have been seen 'talking' to the state through peaceful protests around high cost of living, unemployment, justice and government accountability.³³ 'Talking back' through the NSS, the state has enforced internet shutdowns, harassment, arbitrary arrests, and disappearances.³⁴ On July 3rd, 2024, the South Sudan Revitalised National Transitional Legislative Assembly (RTNLA) passed the controversial National Security Service (NSS) Bill, which further empowers the NSS to arrest and detain individuals suspected of crimes related to national security without a warrant.³⁵ The bill gives the NSS unchecked powers and is easily manipulable for personal vendettas and autocratic conduct. More importantly, it undermines the rule of law and infringes upon the right to due process, freedom of expression, right to assembly, as well as privacy and media freedoms.³⁶ Consequently, it restricts South Sudanese from active citizenship and political participation, which are critical to a successful democratic transition.

³¹ Junub Open Space, LinkedIn page, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.linkedin.com/company/junubopenspace/post/s/?feedView=all>.

³² Anataban South Sudan, Facebook page, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/AnatabanSouthSudan>.

³³ Radio Tamazuj, "Activists Arrested Over Trisha Cee's Death Protests," *Radio Tamazuj*, September 2021, https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/activists-arrested-over-trisha-cee-s-death-protests?fbclid=IwY2xjawF6kFlleHRuA2FlbQIxMQABHc5M Uh3FwYRH09l8C2B3bOwHCrjzyR_3cwCA1KLDOMURi_4an_7pwmTZw_aem_4pb298yEeRoChKVSTkhPJg.

³⁴ Amnesty International, "South Sudan: End New Wave of Repression Against Peaceful Protests," *Amnesty International*, September 2, 2021,

During COVID-19 when the R-TGoNU was unable to successfully mobilise society towards COVID mitigation, South Sudanese youth offered a worthy alternative. Though the number of deaths prevented by youth efforts cannot be statistically quantified, their creative and innovative community engagements were instrumental in crisis response, redressing formal leadership deficits. In the post-pandemic era of state repression, the transformative potential of their influence has been constrained by systemic powers deeply entrenched within political structures. Nonetheless, these young leaders have proven themselves to be progressive, community-focused, and effective in fostering social cohesion. Their efforts will remain relevant, influential and centrally important to any future national peace and state-building processes if they are to be successful over the long term.

Leadership Insights: 'Youth-hood', Waithood and The Opportunity of Crisis

The COVID-19 crisis was characteristically paradoxical, as it exposed the brazen failures of extant formal leadership structures on the one hand and enabled leadership emergence³⁷ from the least expected constituencies on the other. This duality is well visible in South Sudan: failure of extant leadership is seen in the cycle of violence and insecurity and poor government response to COVID-19. Still, youth in South Sudan emerged as leaders capable of offering solutions by campaigning, sensitizing, and mobilizing the population. It is remarkable that young South Sudanese manifested this form of agency in the context of little or no investment in human capital and poor governance.

There are four enabling factors of leadership that are worth mentioning. One, moments of crisis are often

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/south-sudan-end-new-wave-of-repression-against-peaceful-protests/>.

³⁵ "National Security Service Bill, 2014," *International Center for Not-for-Profit Law* (ICNL), accessed October 14, 2024, https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/South-Sudan_nssbill.pdf.

³⁶ "Opinion: National Security Bill a Threat to Civil Liberties," *Radio Tamazuj*, September 13, 2023, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/opinion-national-security-bill-a-threat-to-civil-liberties>.

³⁷ "Prof. Funmi: The COVID-19 Pandemic Will Make Leaders and Break Others in Africa," *The Elephant*, April 25, 2020, <https://www.theelephant.info/videos/2020/04/25/prof-funmi-the-covid-19-pandemic-will-make-leaders-and-break-others-in-africa/>.

opportunities for change, allowing for experimentation with new ideas, different processes or, in this case, alternative forms of leadership to emerge.³⁸ Second, 'youth-hood,' understood as the experience of being young, played a critical role. To be young is to seek adventure, to be imaginative, deviating from the norm and assuming a posture of defiance. In pursuit of meaning and a 'place' in society, JOS and Ana Taban found purpose in creative problem-solving during the time of crisis and beyond. Third, South Sudanese youth leveraged the freedom of ungoverned spaces outside of officialdom, which enabled them to be innovative for the benefit of the citizenry. The use of art, music, festivals, protest and digital technologies facilitated engagement in horizontal and mutually influential ways. Fourth, globalization and advancements in ICT have made it possible for the exchange of ideas such as those on civil liberties and emerging technologies like bitcoin.

The above observations emphasize that youth leadership emerges on the margins of society, out of reach and unencumbered by state control. It seeks autonomy and finds liberation in creative expression and innovation. By traditional standards of leadership that are characterized by hierarchy and 'power over,' youth leadership emerges as an anomaly. This prompts questions that merit further reflection. For instance, can youth leadership only emerge and be sustained in certain geographies and not others? Does it only exist in opposition/resistance to the 'formal'? Would formalizing youth leadership through position-based power pervert its essence and ultimately render it ineffective? Or are there converging points between youth leadership and formal leadership that can be leveraged towards a common good?

The above queries offer no straightforward answers. However, if we take the analogy of the South Sudanese state in youth-hood and waithood seriously, then a window of opportunity presents itself. As earlier mentioned, waithood is not synonymous with inaction, it calls for curiosity, exploration and innovation. Whilst the country endeavours to complete the pending transitional processes, it should pursue alternatives to the Western normative peacebuilding and state building blueprint. This commentary has demonstrated that youth and community-based leadership processes can be effective. Adopting such a participatory approach to

convene the collective aspirations of the South Sudanese people would foster mutuality, repair state-society relations and result in better outcomes for peace, security, and development.

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³⁸ Manos Gkeredakis, Hila Lifshitz-Assaf, and Michael Barrett, "Crisis as Opportunity, Disruption and Exposure: Exploring Emergent Responses to Crisis through Digital

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