CEWARN’s South Sudan CEWERU has several structures. The national steering committee is constituted from the government, representatives of civil society groups, and the security agencies plus some representatives from international bodies like the United Nation Mission for South Sudan (UNMISS). The chairperson of the South Sudan Peace and Reconciliation Commission (SSPRC) heads the steering committee. This is at the national level. The second is the state level, where we have a parallel committee that is headed by the peace commission coordinator who works with the state government. At the community level, we have the county peace response mechanism headed by the county commissioner, who works with local peace committees.

The county mechanism operates at the grassroots level and it is not to be confused with the Rapid Response Fund. The national government needs to prioritise issues of response. Response should be something taken very seriously at the
national level, but that is not the case at this time. This is one of the reasons why most of the CEWE-RU’s work has focused on Eastern Equatoria, the area of South Sudan overlapping with the Karamoja cluster, where it has worked for eight years in conjunction with the Catholic Relief Services (CRS).

Most of the activity takes place on the ground where CEWARN staff coordinate with the RRC, or the Relief and Rehabilitation committees. The RRC commission has been active in the countryside for a long time and although it has been changing names they are still doing the same work. Most of our work is undertaken at the lower levels of the system where people have done a credible job. We do a lot of capacity-building with organisations, some with NGOs but especially the indigenous CBOs who operate within a given locality.

CEWARN’s main function is coordination and sharing of information. We also support analysis undertaken by the NRI at the Centre for Peace and Development Studies in Juba University. It is important to underscore that the nature of conflict in South Sudan is different from that in Uganda, Kenya, or Ethiopia. There is a mix of ethnic groups and most of the population is focused on their own communities. They have their own ways of doing things. The same pertains to conflicts and related issues. The situation in each area varies and although CEWARN’s early warning mechanism is based on a uniform template, the kind of local problems relevant to different regions can vary considerably. This is a key challenge faced in expansion of the model across the region.

We were expanding into Upper Nile and rolled out conflict early warning structures in Jonglei, but efforts were disrupted by the 2013 political crisis. We also initiated a similar process in Unity State, which is operating very well now and in Lake State (the former Great Lakes State), where we conducted training for the peace actors that are now active. We trained the peace workers and monitors but then conditions across this region became difficult because of the political crisis.

In Bahr al Ghazal, we are targeting the seasonal movement of nomads across the international border. The Sudd, the large wetlands region, dries up during the dry season, attracting different herders who congregate there with their animals. Cooperation among the cattle keepers is the norm but they occasionally raid each other. We are doing an assessment of the issues and how we can build on pre-existing forms of cooperation.

CEWARN is also working with us to spread the mechanism to the area of West Equatoria including the border with Democratic Re-
public of Congo. The administrative system in Congo is not as well established as the one in Uganda, and we do not enjoy the same relationship with the Congolese on information sharing. Even so, we are looking into how we can try to do something to alleviate the trauma caused by the cases of child abduction. The young children abducted by the Lords Resistance Army, for example, were isolated for years. When they grow up they are not able to reunite with their families. We can use our cross-border networks to help them.

We are also collaborating with the local authorities and our counterparts in Uganda to monitor the movement of Ambururu nomads. The Ambururu are an unusual case even by our standards. They speak a language that is different from any of the others in the region, cross the borders with little concern for national governments, entering our region from the north, sometimes travelling on horses. They look like Darfurians but they come from outside the Sudan, and as far away as western Africa. They typically come in large numbers, sell cattle to the locals, and at times they instigate conflict in the areas they pass through.

I personally met with some of these nomads. I found out when they come they don’t get any permission from the central government but they do have relations with local authorities in many areas of southern Sudan they pass through. This is an example of how the national government tends not to have effective coordination with the local authorities. This is why the government does not know what the Ambururu are doing. They come and sell their animals and go back. We completed an assessment of the issues but we were not able to act on it.

The 2013-2018 political crisis at the top of the government interrupted most of these initiatives. Eastern Equatoria remains the focus for most of our activities as a consequence. The CEWARN structures are working well in terms of data collection and timely responses, even though distance and poor infrastructure makes communication difficult. Even so, we are able to operate effectively in Eastern Equatoria compared to Jonglei, where it is difficult for the local government and the state authority to act in a coordinated manner because the region does not enjoy the same level of infrastructure as elsewhere. They lack information and even if they do have the relevant information, events can still spin out of control. If something occurs in Equatoria, by contrast, the information reaches the county commissioner quite swiftly. It is easy for them to mobilise, where it is hard at the national level because of the problems of communicating with Juba.
There is more bureaucracy at the centre, so it takes some time for the national committee to look into it. Early warning doesn’t function well with a lot of bureaucracy—although we also cannot do without bureaucracy.

What is the nature of the relationship between pastoralist conflict and political conflicts?

We have two domains of conflict: the traditional pastoralist conflicts and the national level political conflict. Although we can assume they are separate, sometimes they overlap because they all involve competition over resources. There is always some kind of political dimension. People tend to view conflict in Sudan mainly through the lens of opposition at the national level. This conditions how we see the Dinka-Nuer frictions and the on going political conflict, but for us the issues revolve around what’s happening at the local level. For the most part, CEWARN operates in a neutral zone, so the work is not directly affected by the national conflict.

In any event, East Equatoria is different from the other states. There is usually little political influence across the borders. The politicians are not involved in cross-border raids. The local people may cross borders for their own reasons, but the politicians are not causing any harm. The politicians have more cows than the local people. The people who are taking care of the cows have guns. Sometimes the people who are taking care of the cows put on uniforms. That’s where the problems start, but it’s not political.

Jonglei, unlike eastern Equatoria, is a bit unique because there is a lot of interference from the politicians. They have committees that oppose each other: members of Committee A fight the members of Committee B, and they all collaborate in selling cows across the border so they do not pay tax. Naturally there are problems of Dinka versus Dinka in some places. In addition to Dinka versus Dinka, there is Dinka versus Murile, or Murile versus Nuer, and of course Dinka versus Nuer is the big one. But most of the raiding is ethnic and not political, one tribe raiding another tribe for livestock.

In northern Bahr al Ghazal the problems are similar, but involve the Darfurians, like the Misseriya and the Rezigat. Interestingly, there is a committee composed of the Dinka, Misseriya and Rezigat supported by an organisation called Concordis (an American NGO). They constructed a Peace Centre and they hold a ‘Peace Market’ where the communities meet. If there is any problem among them then the committee resolves it. There is also a conference that brings all these communities together. It is held once a year, usually in Aweil, and is attended by all
the people from the border areas, the politicians, the herdsmen, and the traders. The Rezigat and Misseriya visit the market, and this allows us to meet with them and develop insights into what’s going on.

In any event, the pastoralists are the main concern as well as the resources they depend upon, and it is in the case of militia activities that the problems occasionally overlap. Some herdsmen become bandits and some bandits are affiliated to politicians or are available to do someone’s bidding. This is a general problem in places where government structures are weak. It is easy to go from being a bandit militia to a political militia. The militias in eastern Equatoria are just bandits and they do not have any affiliation with anyone in the central government. They don’t know anyone in the government and their main objective is to steal and kill.

What are some of the other key challenges?

The presence of the militias, for example, is very connected to the circulation of small arms. Disarmament has to be undertaken at the regional level with strong government coordination to be effective. Kenyans have a lot of reservations over the issue of disarmament, perhaps because it is too expensive or maybe there is a fear of the unknown. It is the same in South Sudan at the moment—there is fear over disarming. Herders maybe fear another community may come and take all their cattle or they find themselves in danger of being attacked. The government provides security but it is not sufficient so the people believe that they have to protect themselves and to protect their property.

At this juncture, we can aim for reduction of arms but not their elimination all at once, like nuclear disarmament. Once you upset the existing parity you have an even bigger problem. There are also the questions of ammunition; where do they get the bullets? There is no way the militias can supply the ammunition on their own, which suggests that some local authorities are involved. The root problem is that it is quite easy for someone to get a gun. The presence of the small arms is again mainly due to the weakness of the regional governments. Uganda now has a strict law controlling possession of guns with heavy penalties that make it unattractive for someone to hold a gun. Here, there is no proper law controlling the movement of small arms. It is difficult to disarm but you can try to control the commerce. The many regional peace conferences going on both in the south and the north may help over the long run, although they rarely bear fruit in the short term. The problem with peace conferences is the lack of provisions for monitoring and evaluation required to sustain the process.
Other pressing issues, like the incidence of child abduction have not been taken seriously. If the culprits return the child, then everything continues as before. The practice of abduction, like small arms, is becoming commercialised. In many cases abducted children become like slaves forced to work within the house or they are trained to engage in crime, and the females are sold into marriage. The discrepancy in prices when abducted children are sold follow market forces, which is why prices are higher for the female captives because they can be exchanged for bride price.

Is it possible that you may be setting yourself up for failure when suddenly you significantly widen the objectives to include new categories like abduction; what are the major priorities to make the new strategy objectives work?

For this new strategic framework to work well we need the government and the locals to take ownership. CEWARN may operate well most of the time but cannot take responsibility for everything as we go forward, so how can the actors on the ground assume ownership? We do a lot of training but in South Sudan, people everywhere are facing different challenges. Most South Sudanese believe they are not part of the system although we really want them to own it.

It is important that such issues are addressed at the policy level and then followed through at the county level where there are the usual gaps between policy and practice.

The cross-border circulation of livestock is a practical example. When livestock cross borders to access pasture, there is no real problem. When the cattle cross the border for sale, problems arise because they do not pay tax. The revenue lost is significant and the local government does not benefit from the commerce. But when the cattle are stolen the same administration is supposed to take action. This is a key policy challenge for the IGAD Ministers of Foreign Affairs, who play a key role in governing cross-border interactions and coordinating the implementation of policies.

There are limits to what CEWARN and its partners can do in this case. It is an area where people have their own ways of doing things. Keeping in mind that we also have our ways of doing things means we will all face a common challenge, but we may succeed and help this system take us forward. Understanding the local context helps make it work better but nothing is automatic. Naturally there are always hurdles at the beginning. Still, the system is a work in progress and it will work better the more people recognise its importance. Much of
the training with the local CBOs focuses on monitoring and evaluation and building the capacity to facilitate small meetings. Since we have limited funds for the conflict response, this requires that we help teach them how to utilise the money available effectively. We assist them in developing the capacity to work with minimum supervision. If you do not do this, everything stagnates. We need to continue with the same people because they understand the early warning concept. When they bring different people, it’s a problem because we have to repeat and in effect start over.

We have also undertaken similar activities with the military by training the army personnel to work better with the civilian population. There is a lot of suspicion when people see someone in uniform. Once you put on the uniform, you are an enemy to them. This is why we brought the army, police, prison officers, and other security people together with local leaders and civil society actors. We held a week-long meeting where we discussed the frictions between the two and how both of them need to work together as one unit because if the peace process is going to hold water, they have to be on the same page. The civilians should not provide the wrong information when they are responding. The military are not sent there to kill, they are there to help calm things down. The process of interaction generated a lot of useful information and insights about how we all can work together better. We hope that this kind of activity can be extended to other areas.

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