



## Speaking with a 'soft voice': professional and pragmatic civilities amongst South Sudanese NGO leaders

Alice Robinson

**To cite this article:** Alice Robinson (2023): Speaking with a 'soft voice': professional and pragmatic civilities amongst South Sudanese NGO leaders, *Peacebuilding*, DOI: [10.1080/21647259.2023.2209400](https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2023.2209400)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2023.2209400>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 14 May 2023.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 72



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

## Speaking with a 'soft voice': professional and pragmatic civilities amongst South Sudanese NGO leaders

Alice Robinson 

Department of International Development, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the forms of 'civility' promoted by South Sudanese NGO leaders and staff in their efforts to navigate a context of pervasive political repression. Drawing on in-depth, life-work history interviews, it shows how the careful cultivation of a 'non-political' identity was a way of securing space to operate in a highly militarised, politically restricted environment, of working across the divisions created by conflict, and of creating small spaces for change. The article also points to the limitations of these non-political positions, to the struggles of aspirational projects to overcome the inequalities in which they are embedded, and to the risk of reproducing the hierarchies and exclusions of the wider humanitarian industry. For external actors engaged in 'localisation' efforts, the discussion is a reminder that decisions about which organisations to fund are inherently political, with implications for dynamics of inequality and marginalisation in South Sudanese (civil) society.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 January 2023  
Accepted 28 April 2023

### KEYWORDS

Civility; civil society; civil pragmatism; NGOs; South Sudan

## Introduction

Joseph<sup>1</sup> is the director of a small peacebuilding-oriented non-governmental organisation (NGO), based in South Sudan's capital, Juba. We met on a hot day, and there was no power in their two-room office, so we spoke outside in the shade of a large tree. We had a wide-ranging conversation, discussing his own experiences of work and education, the history of the organisation, and his experiences of peace-making and advocacy in South Sudan over more than a decade. The organisation was formed with a specific vision, to facilitate dialogue between communities with whom the founders had a long-standing relationship, but this vision has not materialised, because donors, in Joseph's words, 'come with their own ideas' and 'everything is guided' by funding. As with many small NGOs in South Sudan, he and his team work mostly as volunteers, occasionally receiving short-term contracts from UN agencies and international NGOs for three to six months. Like all NGOs in South Sudan, they require the consent of the government to operate – 'they are the ones giving us licence, they can withdraw their licence anytime' – and this limits what they can say. When they talk, for example, about fraught issues of accountability, they emphasise:

**CONTACT** Alice Robinson  [a.m.robinson@lse.ac.uk](mailto:a.m.robinson@lse.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup>All names have been changed, and identifying details have been removed.

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

It is not about you, government, alone, even we the NGOs need to be accountable. Even how we are employing people, corruption is not one side. Even NGOs, there are some who do not follow the rules, just fixing anybody who is a relative. So let us come, hold together, join hands, and fight. So, you check on us, also we check on you. We are just filling the gaps, so, if there is any gap, we remind you, this one need to be done, with a soft voice, reminding you, not violent. So, this is how we are coexisting with the government.<sup>2</sup>

Joseph's account reflects a particular form of civility, encapsulated in the idea of the 'soft voice', as a pragmatic and discursive strategy for navigating a context of political repression. Similar themes emerged across interviews, as interlocutors, primarily the directors and staff of South Sudanese NGOs, narrated the careful ways of talking, avoidance of contentious topics and intentionally 'non-political' positioning that were essential to getting by and 'making the everyday work'<sup>3</sup> in a highly militarised, politically restricted environment. Interviewees also highlighted the importance of personal relationships, and emphasised collaboration over confrontation in their interactions with the government. These social and discursive practices enabled interviewees to carve out a space from which to operate, and, at times, to engage in advocacy and influence the government in small ways.

At the same time, efforts to distance oneself and one's organisation from 'politics' often also reflected a deeper moral stance, including a rejection of the violence that has been committed in the service of politics and political ambition in South Sudan. This was particularly clear in individuals' narrations of their own career histories. Interlocutors often expressed a desire to remain independent from 'politics', and sought an alternative space from which to contribute – in the words of one young woman – to 'building South Sudan'. Linked to this were efforts to transcend divisions engendered by conflict and to work in a way that reflected a belief, in Joseph's words, that 'South Sudan is for everybody'. Here, ideas of civility were about more than passive or pragmatic politeness, reflecting, instead, an active stance for peace, an aspiration for inclusive nationhood, and the projection of an alternative, civil political vision for South Sudan.

The ambivalence of claims to being outside 'politics' is that NGOs are, of course, intimately involved in the exercise of power, and that the NGO sector in South Sudan is riven with and replicates inequalities, hierarchies and exclusions that are themselves linked to conflict in complex ways. Claims to being outside politics are inherently political,<sup>4</sup> and the politics of NGOs is not always about civility. This is patently clear when politics is understood broadly as the negotiation of power relations and an inherent feature of social relations. Brković, for example, building on Butler, suggests politics 'refers to a particular redistribution of the ability to live a good life and presents a dimension of any social encounter'.<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, the work of NGOs is manifestly political. In South Sudan, NGOs are gatekeepers to scarce employment, resources and services in a context of profound economic precarity, and the humanitarian industry on which they largely depend for resources has been an integral driver of processes of class formation and growing social and economic stratification. Over the last

---

<sup>2</sup>Interview, November 2021.

<sup>3</sup>Laust Lund Elbek, 'There's a Hole in the Fence: Civil Pragmatism in Ambiguous Encounters on Lampedusa, Italy', *Ethnos* (2021): 1–19, 8.

<sup>4</sup>Čarna Brković, 'Depoliticization "from Below": Everyday Humanitarianism in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Narodna Umjetnost: Hrvatski Časopis Za Etnologiju i Folkloristiku* 53, no. 1 (2016): 97–115.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 107.

two decades, Diing et al. write, ‘wealth (in cash, cattle, education, land and decision-making power) has increasingly become concentrated within the small classes of UN and NGO sector employees, government stalwarts and military – political actors aligned with the [Government of South Sudan] leadership’.<sup>6</sup> In South Sudan, the ability to make oneself heard with a ‘soft voice’, through the platform offered by the NGO sphere, is distributed very unevenly.

The notion of speaking with a ‘soft voice’ explored here resonates with Mac Ginty’s discussion of everyday peace and the ‘banality of civility’, drawing attention to the social practices people use to ‘navigate their passage through a deeply divided society’.<sup>7</sup> Following Thiranagama et al., I understand civility as a fundamentally fraught, ambivalent concept, including norms and practices that can invoke respect and restraint in the face of difference and enable new forms of sociality, but also stifle dissent, uphold class privilege and exclude the marginal and disenfranchised.<sup>8</sup> Claims to and calls for civility thus have to be examined in context, considering how they are located within and interact with dynamics of inequality, exclusion and structural violence.

This paper is based on research conducted in South Sudan between late 2018 and late 2021, best described as a form of ‘patchwork ethnography’.<sup>9</sup> This article draws particularly on 71 in-depth life-work history interviews<sup>10</sup> conducted towards the end of my fieldwork with the directors and staff of a range of South Sudanese NGOs. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded and transcribed, and lasted between one and three hours. Interviewees came from a wide range of organisations, with varied histories, sizes and areas of work, though almost all were registered, urban NGOs. These interviews mostly took place in Juba, the capital, and Wau, another urban centre, though they included interviewees from organisations based in other parts of the country, conducted remotely or while they were visiting the capital. I also had innumerable informal conversations, read organisational documents, and conducted observations at NGO events, meetings and offices, taking detailed daily fieldnotes.

The article proceeds as follows: The next section provides a theoretical discussion of civility, summarising recent ethnographic expositions of the concept. The third section provides a very brief introduction to the history of conflict and civil society in South Sudan. The fourth examines civility as a pragmatic stance (speaking with a ‘soft voice’), linked to the ideas about advocacy and influencing in contexts of political repression, while the fifth considers civility as a deeper moral position (‘South Sudan is for everybody’). This is followed by a discussion and conclusion.

---

<sup>6</sup>Abraham Diing et al., ‘South Sudan: Youth, Violence and Livelihoods’ (Rift Valley Institute, 2021), 26.

<sup>7</sup>Roger Mac Ginty, ‘Everyday Peace: Bottom-up and Local Agency in Conflict-Affected Societies’, *Security Dialogue* 45, no. 6 (2014): 548–64, 54.

<sup>8</sup>Sharika Thiranagama, Tobias Kelly, and Carlos Forment, ‘Introduction: Whose Civility?’, *Anthropological Theory* 18, no. 2–3 (2018): 153–74.

<sup>9</sup>Referring to research efforts that may draw upon multiple, shorter-term trips and varied data sources, working within limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and other constraints, while maintaining the depth of engagement with and long-term commitment to specific places and people that characterises ‘traditional’ fieldwork. See Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe, ‘A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography’, *Member Voice*, Fieldsights, 2020.

<sup>10</sup>David Lewis, ‘Using Life Histories in Social Policy Research: The Case of Third Sector/Public Sector Boundary Crossing’, *Journal of Social Policy* 37, no. 4 (2008): 559–78.

## The ambivalence of civility

At the core of much recent discussion around the concept of civility is its ambivalence: the possibility for calls for and forms of civility to promote respect and restraint across lines of difference and disagreement and enable new forms of solidarity and sociality, but also entrench inequalities, suppress dissent and legitimise exclusion. Dominant liberal approaches to ‘civility’, like the associated concept of ‘civil society’, are rooted in and emerged from the ‘bourgeoisie urban cultures of post-Enlightenment Europe’, linked to ideas of respect and restraint in the face of difference or disagreement.<sup>11</sup> Liberal theorists have tended to celebrate civility for its role in ‘facilitating social order and minimising conflict’,<sup>12</sup> in the words of Boyd, or, per Calhoun, in preventing daily social exchange from turning ‘nasty and sometimes hazardous’ through conformity with ‘socially conventional rules for the expression of respect, tolerance, and considerateness’.<sup>13</sup> Yet, others have highlighted the violence often at the heart of ideas of civility. Calls for civility have long been used to exclude and silence, suppressing debate and dissent through the privileging of etiquette and manners over passion and agonism, and favouring the status quo over radical change.<sup>14</sup> Crucially, civility is not incompatible with violence; rather, it has frequently been used to legitimise and incite violence against ‘uncivil’ others, as is abundantly clear in the intimate links between civility and colonialism.<sup>15</sup>

Mitchell argues that in focusing primarily on the actions, speech and comportment of individuals, liberal theories of in/civility have obscured the crucial role of the behaviour of a state. Instead, civility, she argues, can be viewed as an effect, created by the existence of a responsive state.<sup>16</sup> As Mitchell argues, the ‘soft speech’ of some is more readily heard than that of others, and the appearance of civility is directly linked to political (non)recognition:

Those who find that they are recognized and are confident that they will be heard, have the luxury of *appearing* to be more civil . . . Those whose voices are routinely ignored, however, find that they must exert additional effort to repeat themselves or amplify their voices, making speakers appear louder, more aggressive, and less civil.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, civility can also be a force for change, and one of the central questions motivating recent academic discussion on the subject is if, how and when it might be transformative, rather than conservative and exclusionary.<sup>18</sup> Mac Ginty links the ‘banality of civility’ to the concept of everyday peace, understood as the norms and practices people use to minimise conflict in everyday life. Examples include the avoidance of contentious subjects, ritualised politeness or the concealment of one’s identity or opinion.<sup>19</sup> While at minimum, practices of everyday peace might be about eking out a safe space or façade of

<sup>11</sup>Thiranagama, Kelly, and Forment, ‘Introduction’, 155.

<sup>12</sup>Richard Boyd, ‘The Value of Civility?’ *Urban Studies* 43, no. 5–6 (2006): 863–78, 874.

<sup>13</sup>Cheshire Calhoun, ‘The Virtue of Civility’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2000): 251–75, 255.

<sup>14</sup>Thiranagama, Kelly, and Forment, ‘Introduction’, 154.

<sup>15</sup>Thomas Blom Hansen, ‘Civics, Civility and Race in Post-Apartheid South Africa’, *Anthropological Theory* 18, no. 2–3 (2018): 296–325; Holger Nehring, ‘“Civility” in History: Some Observations on the History of the Concept’, *European Review of History* 18, no. 3 (2011): 313–33.

<sup>16</sup>Lisa Mitchell, ‘Civility and Collective Action: Soft Speech, Loud Roars, and the Politics of Recognition’, *Anthropological Theory* 18, no. 2–3 (2018): 217–47.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 232–233.

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Suryakant Waghmore, *Civility against Caste: Dalit Politics and Citizenship in Western India* (SAGE Publications India, 2013); Thiranagama, Kelly, and Forment, ‘Introduction’.

<sup>19</sup>Mac Ginty, ‘Everyday Peace’.

normality, at maximum, this can ‘constitute a category of resistance, especially to the division and incompatibility that may be preferred by political and military elites’, thus perhaps challenging the norms and narratives that legitimise conflict.<sup>20</sup> Also relevant here is Elbek’s conceptualisation of civil pragmatism, understood as ‘forms of polite standardised engagement that serve to peacefully maintain public space’, including efforts to make the everyday ‘work’.<sup>21</sup> This is explored in the context of interactions between islanders and migrants in Lampedusa, and includes politeness and courtesy, as well as the downplaying of immigration-related anxieties in public. It is an ambiguous practice involving ‘pragmatic co-presence rather grand political imaginaries and discourses’.<sup>22</sup>

Ambivalence and ambiguity are at the centre of recent ethnographic explorations of civility. A common theme is of discourses and practices that aspire to inclusivity, envision new political realms and seek to transcend boundaries; and yet, that are embedded in and reproduce unequal social relationships, creating new hierarchies and exclusions or mirroring old ones. Hansen, for example, argues that the ‘ethno-civilities’ of the Civics movement that helped bring down apartheid in South Africa have struggled to transcend the racialised legacy in which they are embedded. Thus, he argues that ideals of civility are ‘inextricably bound up with projects of (repressive) racialised governance, and the emancipatory projects that contest, negate and oppose them inadvertently have to operate in that very same discursive and moral terrain’.<sup>23</sup> Kelly’s work similarly explores the struggles of aspirational projects to overcome the unequal social relations in which they are embedded. Kelly argues that, amongst pacifists on community farms in Second World War Britain, civility was ‘a form of imaginative potential’,<sup>24</sup> oriented towards ‘showing that another way of life was possible’<sup>25</sup>; but that this pacifist civility ‘was embedded in already existing social relationships, complete with their own inequalities and contradictions’, and reproduced middle-class and masculine ways of being in the world.<sup>26</sup>

Across these accounts, civility appears as a form of political dissent and a way of envisioning alternatives, but also as embedded in and limited by already-existing, unequal social relations. These themes come together in work by Anderson and Hromadžić. Anderson explores discourses of civility amongst urban, property-owning middle classes in pre-war Aleppo. He shows how the language of civility, through notions of order, culture and cleanliness, worked as a form of political dissent, imbued with critiques of the lethargy of the state, the absence of accountability in the public sector and the ‘chaos’ or mistreatment of public spaces. These notions, at the same time, worked to exclude rural, non-property-owning classes, silencing the demands of the rural poor by casting them as comparatively uncivil. Civility thus worked in characteristically contradictory ways, as both ‘grounds for envisaging an alternative space in which to live as citizens and as a discourse seeking to police urban space’.<sup>27</sup> In Hromadžić’s work, too,

---

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 555.

<sup>21</sup>Elbek, ‘There’s a Hole in the Fence’, 3.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 15.

<sup>23</sup>Hansen, ‘Civics, Civility and Race in Post-Apartheid South Africa’, 303.

<sup>24</sup>Tobias Kelly, ‘The Potential for Civility: British Pacifists in the Second World War’, *Anthropological Theory* 18, no. 2–3 (2018): 198–216, 201.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 205.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 200.

<sup>27</sup>Paul Anderson, ‘“Order” and “Civility”: Middle-Class Imaginaries of Citizenship before the Syrian Uprising’, *Anthropological Theory* 18, no. 2–3 (2018): 248–70, 250.

civility functions as a register of discontent, as well as a way of policing boundaries between the rural and (semi-)urban in a context of rapid social and economic change.<sup>28</sup> She defines civility as a form of ‘mutuality with limits’ that works to regulate the field of socio-political inclusion, expanding to include some (in her case, urban, ethno-religious others) while reproducing exclusions based on geography, rurality and class. As suggested in these accounts, the inevitable corollary of claims to ‘civility’ is that there are always some people and practices that are rendered *uncivil* in contrast.

## NGOs, conflict and politics in South Sudan

South Sudan’s people have experienced decades of recurrent conflict. This includes the first (1955–1972) and second (1983–2005) Sudanese civil wars, and a renewed civil war within South Sudan in 2013. The causes of conflict in South Sudan are immensely complex; they have deep historical roots, stretching back to the ways in which South Sudan was governed and exploited by successive colonial and post-colonial regimes,<sup>29</sup> and to processes of political fragmentation, militarisation and class formation that date back to at least the second Sudanese civil war.<sup>30</sup> These years of violent conflict, as well as systemic underdevelopment and government corruption and neglect, have left the country one of the poorest in the world.

The second Sudanese civil war ended in 2005 with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed by the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). The CPA created a new, semi-autonomous government in the south, led by the SPLM, with significant autonomy to govern over the region and access to a share of oil revenues. However, it did little to address intra-southern conflicts. In 1991, the SPLM/A had split dramatically, leading to a decade of devastating intra-southern fighting, and to some of the worst abuses of the war. The SPLM/A during those years was a ‘constantly morphing alliance of personalities, coalitions and factions’; the Sudanese government fanned the flames of these conflicts, arming breakaway southern factions as a form of proxy warfare.<sup>31</sup> Rival southern leaders armed and mobilised ethnically based militia, and targeted civilians along ethnic lines.<sup>32</sup> These internecine, intra-southern conflicts led to a significant polarisation and militarisation of ethnic identities, and undermined ethical codes that had previously regulated and restrained violence between and within groups.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, many breakaway leaders and factions were reintegrated into the SPLM/A.

Following the CPA, South Sudan’s economy grew substantially. This was a period of rapid social and economic transformation, and deepening inequality.<sup>34</sup> There were vast inflows of international funding, focused on state-building, reconstruction and service

<sup>28</sup> Azra Hromadžić, ‘Streets, Scum and People: Discourses of (in)Civility in Postwar Bihać, Bosnia and Herzegovina’, *Anthropological Theory* 18, no. 2–3 (2018): 326–56.

<sup>29</sup> Øystein H. Rolandsen and Nicki Kindersley, ‘South Sudan: A Political Economy Analysis’, 2017, <https://nupi.brage.unit.no/nupi-xmlui/handle/11250/2460927>.

<sup>30</sup> See Clemence Pinaud, ‘South Sudan: Civil War, Predation and the Making of a Military Aristocracy’, *African Affairs* 113, no. 451 (2014): 192–211.

<sup>31</sup> Rolandsen and Kindersley, ‘South Sudan’, 5.

<sup>32</sup> Jok Madut Jok and Sharon Elaine Hutchinson, ‘Sudan’s Prolonged Second Civil War and The Militarization of Nuer and Dinka Ethnic Identities’, *African Studies Review* 42, no. 2 (1999): 125–45.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Diing et al., ‘South Sudan’.

delivery.<sup>35</sup> However, violence continued in many parts of the country. Drawing on its newfound oil wealth, the southern government incorporated opposition leaders and groups into the SPLM, creating ‘a situation where staging a rebellion became a means to access government power, resources and positions’.<sup>36</sup> Several prominent analyses depict the entrenchment during this period of a politico-military elite class, who have used violence as a means of claiming power and wealth.<sup>37</sup>

By the time of South Sudan’s independence, the fragile political balance was unraveling. Political tensions grew, exacerbated by a 2012 oil shut down which precipitated the collapse of South Sudan’s economy. These tensions erupted into violence in the capital in December 2013, which quickly spread. Over the next five years, an estimated 400,000 people died and 4.5 million were displaced.<sup>38</sup> Political and military elites again turned to ethnic affiliation as a way to mobilise support, fuelling ‘ethnic hatred . . . as part of their mobilisation of communities and competition for political power’.<sup>39</sup> Both the government and armed opposition groups targeted people based on ethnicity and presumed allegiance,<sup>40</sup> and committed extreme violence against civilians. Elite manoeuvrings, however, are not the whole story: as Kindersley shows, communities in different parts of the country have taken up arms for complex reasons, linked to societal and economic crises, injustices and ‘gross inequalities’ associated with the commodification and expropriation of land and resources, grievances stemming from ‘three generations of unresolved violence’, and the need to protect themselves from ‘an over-extended and violent military-security sector’.<sup>41</sup> A peace deal was signed in 2018, but violence has continued in many parts of the country, with continued ‘subnational’ violence often linked in complex ways to national politicians and political agendas.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout South Sudan’s long wars, there have always been actors, institutions, norms and practices that have sought to resist and restrain violence, and an array of actors that could be grouped under the label of ‘civil society’. As Kindersley writes, in the face of ‘incitement to ethno-nationalist divisions and mutual violence’, people across the country engage in ‘acts of defiance and resistance that often go unseen by outsiders: including pushbacks against recruitments, inter-ethnic mutual support and aid, and memorialisation work’.<sup>43</sup> Pendle’s work highlights the plurality of authorities seeking to influence violence in South Sudan, including how the limits on violence have been debated amongst the *titweng*

<sup>35</sup>Gunnar M. Sørbo, Mareike Schomerus, and Lovise Aalen, ‘Country Evaluation Brief: South Sudan’ (NORAD and CMI, 2016), <https://www.odi.org/publications/10640-country-evaluation-brief-south-sudan>.

<sup>36</sup>Diana Felix da Costa, Naomi Pendle, and Jérôme Tubiana, ‘What is Happening Now is Not Raiding, It’s War’, in *Routledge Handbook of the Horn of Africa*, ed. Jean-Nicolas Bach (Routledge, 2022), 224–38, 224.

<sup>37</sup>See, for example, Majak D’Agoot, ‘Taming the Dominant Gun Class in South Sudan – Africa Center for Strategic Studies’, *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 2018, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/taming-the-dominant-gun-class-in-south-sudan/>; and Pinaud, ‘South Sudan’.

<sup>38</sup>Francesco Checchi et al., ‘Estimates of Crisis-Attributable Mortality in South Sudan, December 2013–April 2018. A Statistical Analysis’ (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2018).

<sup>39</sup>Diing et al., ‘South Sudan’, 45.

<sup>40</sup>Human Rights Watch, ‘South Sudan’s New War: Abuses by Government and Opposition Forces’, Human Rights Watch, August 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/07/south-sudans-new-war/abuses-government-and-opposition-forces>.

<sup>41</sup>Nicola Kindersley, ‘Military Livelihoods and the Political Economy in South Sudan’, in *Routledge Handbook of the Horn of Africa*, ed. Jean-Nicolas Bach (Routledge, 2022), 179–88, 185, 182.

<sup>42</sup>Joshua Craze and Ferenc David Marko, ‘Death by Peace: How South Sudan’s Peace Agreement Ate the Grassroots’, *African Arguments*, 2022, <https://africanarguments.org/2022/01/death-by-peace-how-south-sudans-peace-agreement-ate-the-grassroots/>.

<sup>43</sup>Kindersley, ‘Military Livelihoods and the Political Economy in South Sudan’, 184.



and *gojam* cattle-guards,<sup>44</sup> and how prophets have sometimes encouraged and sometimes sought to restrain violence.<sup>45</sup> Schools and universities in South Sudan have long provided ‘spaces of protection, struggle and change’, including opportunities for people to come together across ethnic lines, though they have also been permeated by violence.<sup>46</sup> In recent years, in a context of conflict and repression, non-violent action has taken various forms, including vigils, marches, radio programmes, murals and music.<sup>47</sup> South Sudan also has a rich and diverse associational landscape that stretches far beyond its recent proliferation of NGOs, including rural, vernacular institutions structured around ethnicity and kinship, though these have been strained and reshaped by conflict.<sup>48</sup>

Professional NGOs are a relatively new phenomenon in South Sudan, and the South Sudanese NGO landscape has, from the outset, been heavily shaped by international humanitarian actors and agendas. Over many years, South Sudanese NGOs have been encouraged and incentivised to mirror the policies and practices of international organisations; in Massoud’s words, ‘the most successful mimics are the ones most likely to receive donor funding and the prestige that comes with it’.<sup>49</sup> Particularly since the outbreak of conflict in 2013, numbers of professional, relief-oriented national NGOs have grown rapidly. ‘Localisation’ has become a prominent topic amongst aid actors in South Sudan, with international humanitarian agencies committing to devolve greater resources and responsibility to ‘local’ actors,<sup>50</sup> though relationships between international agencies and South Sudanese NGOs remain very unequal, with interviewees often lamenting that they have limited control over the work that they do.

Political repression in South Sudan has been growing, particularly since the outbreak of conflict in 2013. Freedom of expression and association are tightly curtailed.<sup>51</sup> Extensive electronic and physical surveillance create ‘a pervasive climate of fear and self-censorship’.<sup>52</sup> Reports by Amnesty International<sup>53</sup> and the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan<sup>54</sup> document harassment, surveillance, arbitrary arrest and detention, forced disappearance and extrajudicial killings of critics and civil society activists by national security forces, and an environment of ‘repression and political intolerance’.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup>Naomi Pendle, ‘Competing Authorities and Norms of Restraint: Governing Community-Embedded Armed Groups in South Sudan’, *International Interactions* 47, no. 5 (2021): 873–97.

<sup>45</sup>Sharon Hutchinson and Naomi Pendle, ‘Violence, Legitimacy, and Prophecy: Nuer Struggles with Uncertainty in South Sudan’, *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 3 (2015): 415–30.

<sup>46</sup>Julia Duany, Rebecca Lorins, and Edward Thomas, ‘Education, Conflict and Civicness in South Sudan: An Introduction’ (LSE and South Sudan Studies Association, 2021), 6.

<sup>47</sup>Moses Monday John, ‘Building the Capacity of Civil Society Organisations in Nonviolent Campaigning: A Case Study from South Sudan’, in *Civil Society and Peacebuilding in Sub-Saharan Africa in the Anthropocene: An Overview*, ed. Jean Chrysostome Kiyala and Geoff Thomas Harris (Springer International Publishing, 2022), 355–81.

<sup>48</sup>Edward Thomas, ‘NPA Civil Society Program Evaluation’, 2018, <https://norad.no/en/toolspublications/publications/ngo-evaluations/2018/npa-civil-society-program-evaluation/>.

<sup>49</sup>Mark Fathi Massoud, ‘Work Rules: How International NGOs Build Law in War-Torn Societies’, *Law & Society Review* 49, no. 2 (2015): 333–64, 353.

<sup>50</sup>See Alice Robinson, ‘Localisation and Conflict Sensitivity: Lessons on Good Practice from South Sudan’ (CSRF South Sudan, 2021), <https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/repository/localisation-and-conflict-sensitivity-lessons-on-good-practice-from-south-sudan/>.

<sup>51</sup>Human Rights Watch, ‘World Report 2019: Rights Trends in South Sudan’, January 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/south-sudan>.

<sup>52</sup>Amnesty International, ‘“These Walls Have Ears”: The Chilling Effect of Surveillance in South Sudan’, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr65/3577/2021/en/>, 6.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>UN HRC, ‘Report of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan (A/HRC/49/78)’, 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/report-commission-human-rights-south-sudan-ahrc4978>.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 18.

This is the context in which claims to being outside ‘politics’ are located. References to ‘politics’ here are best understood as references to a *system*, in which claims on power have been made through violence and corruption has been pervasive. It often appeared, in interlocuters’ accounts, as a system one could get swallowed up in with little prospect of changing. Interviewees often expressed a desire to remain independent from ‘politics’. In the words of one young founder,

I want to do something where I have the freedom to think and do things openly and without any trouble . . . I can’t flourish more in a very difficult environment where things have to be politicised . . . I just want to be straightforward.

Politics, of course, pervades NGOs; my aim is not to argue otherwise. In South Sudan, as anywhere, NGOs reflect the conflicts and divisions of the world around them. My interest, however, is in exploring how interlocuters made ‘claims to impartiality and being outside (violent) politics and power’,<sup>56</sup> and, in doing so, participated in the production and enactment of the boundaries of the ‘political’. They did so for reasons that were both pragmatic, as a way of getting-by in a context of political repression, and moral, linked to critiques of the South Sudanese political system.

### Speaking with a ‘soft voice’: pragmatic civilities in NGO-government relations

This section examines civility as a pragmatic strategy to navigate a context of political violence and repression, resonating with Elbek’s notion of civil pragmatism,<sup>57</sup> and Mac Ginty’s concept of everyday peace.<sup>58</sup> Encapsulated in Joseph’s reference to speaking with a ‘soft voice’, civility here includes careful processes and practices of relationship-building, cautious speech and diplomacy. This is a pragmatic and relational strategy that is about more than tone of voice: it relies on an intimate knowledge of the complexities of South Sudanese politics, the personalities involved and the workings of government at different levels. This enables interlocuters to effectively gauge the boundaries of the acceptably and unacceptably political in any given moment.

Tight constraints on freedom of expression and association in South Sudan have had a profound chilling effect, and interlocuters often emphasised that they would not ‘touch’ politics, focusing instead on humanitarian and service delivery activities. Interviewees across varied organisations consistently positioned themselves as ‘neutral’, ‘non-partisan’ or ‘non-political’. This applied to the organisations themselves, and to the public persona of the director. The director of a rapidly growing NGO in the country’s south-west, for example, reflected that being the director of an organisation had made him more ‘careful’ and ‘cautious’ about what he says. As a ‘young man in the community’, he said, he could have spoken more openly. However, the requirements of his role were such that he could not comment on ‘anything which is involving conflict in a community’, or any other ‘contentious issue’. As director of an organisation, he says, ‘I need to be careful in how I say certain things . . . certain things you just don’t touch. Politics here, you don’t get engaged much in it. If you hear anything, you don’t have much comment about it’. In

<sup>56</sup>Pascale Schild and Martina Santschi, ‘In/Civility in Peace and Conflict’, Call for Papers, 2022.

<sup>57</sup>Elbek, ‘There’s a Hole in the Fence’.

<sup>58</sup>Mac Ginty, ‘Everyday Peace’.

a statement reflecting many others, the director of a much larger, Juba-based organisation, said, in his organisation:

We don't want to go very much into the political component. We remain to do our development and humanitarian work. We don't want to get involved in the political component, because, that's politics, we don't want to play. We always remain neutral.<sup>59</sup>

All registered NGOs must work with government agencies, whether to secure permission to operate or because their work involves more explicit advocacy, and efforts to influence government policy. In the latter case, interviewees still often emphasised a non-political, non-partisan position. Here, civility – linked to ideas of politeness and professionalism – could be a way to facilitate smooth relationships with government counterparts, and to try and exert influence in small, safe ways.

This was reflected in conversations with the director of a mid-sized NGO, founded more than two decades ago. The organisation was deeply affected by the post-2013 wars; their offices were looted and destroyed, and many of their staff fled. The organisation had to 'build up again from zero'. They became more involved in efforts to influence policy at the national level, joining several networks and coalitions and engaging in advocacy around different issues. To facilitate their advocacy, they position themselves as 'allies' to the government, ensure that they are 'not criticising, but advising' and – crucially – always seek to remain 'professional'. Professionalism could be demonstrated through 'skills', 'capacity' and by being 'neutral'. Thus, he said, 'we are seeing ourselves as part of the process, and we are seeing ourselves as allies to the government at this time. And we are able to influence, whether the policies or whether the direction of what can be done'. By being part of the process as a 'neutral' party, he said, you are able to be 'pushing for the good, or for the betterment, of the country . . . And being part of political party would no longer take you further . . . [instead] you remain neutral, and continue advising in the process'. He also emphasised the importance of trust- and relationship-building, over 'arguing and accusing'; describing advocacy as a matter of 'relations', and asking, 'if you don't have relations, how do you act?' In this way, they seek to make the government 'accountable' on things they have committed to, in laws and pledges, always phrasing this neutrally 'to ensure that we are together. We have one goal'.<sup>60</sup>

A similarly relational and diplomatic approach is adopted by legal activists in South Sudan, as detailed in Rachel Ibreck's recent book. In this context, she writes, assisting victims of injustice and simply surviving as an activist requires 'fostering extensive and diverse social connections, including relationships with powerful allies, as well as cultivating deep cultural understandings and knowledge of the laws'.<sup>61</sup> This is a 'convivial' and pragmatic approach that relies on building good relationships and fostering alliances with people from diverse backgrounds, including across social and political divides. Activists, she writes, 'did not dwell on the morality, ethnicity or the political allegiances of the individuals they dealt with, they simply tried to harness their support practically'.<sup>62</sup> In addition, resonating with the quotes above, legal activists 'were quiet about their own political allegiances' and 'carefully distinguished between the ongoing political

---

<sup>59</sup>See note 2 above.

<sup>60</sup>Interview, October 2021.

<sup>61</sup>Rachel Ibreck, *South Sudan's Injustice System: Law And Activism On The Frontline* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 201.

competition and their work in the legal field', as well as positioning themselves 'in opposition to "the system" rather than particular warring parties or ethnic groups'.<sup>63</sup> They also emphasised that 'everything depended on a "good approach"' and that it would not work to 'condemn and criticise'.<sup>64</sup> Instead, they had to be skilled in negotiation, and engaged in a 'flexible sociability'.<sup>65</sup>

Interviewees involved in service provision, particularly at larger scales, occupy a different social position; they have more resources to command, and with this comes greater influence. The notion of speaking with a 'soft voice' still applies, however. In some cases, interviewees argued that they gained significant influence through their role in service provision. The director of one of South Sudan's largest NGOs, whose organisation implements large-scale programmes subcontracted by international humanitarian agencies, was sceptical of civil society activists who are publicly critical of the government, saying, 'I really believe activism is good. But it's almost purely a western style of doing things, and it doesn't bear fruits'. Instead, the position he's in allows him, he feels, to wield significant influence, arguing that 'if you are understanding the context, you are well placed if you are contributing economically and socially to the community, that's when you can be in a position to change something political'; and that, 'when you are providing assistance in an area, then you are actually substituting or exonerating what the government is supposed to do. And since you are exonerating what the government is supposed to do, then you kept the advantage of that to correct the government'.<sup>66</sup> Added to this, he says, 'my personal relations matters', as well as how he phrases things. Another interviewee, also the director of a large, service-provision-oriented NGO, felt that he had more influence than his colleagues who worked in government ministries; thus, he argued, 'what is the point of going to sit there with all your knowledge that you cannot exercise? ... you have more influence outside [the government] than when you are inside'. He continued,

Government listens to NGOs, by the way. You find sometimes they mistreat NGOs, but when NGO has a collective voice, you know, it's a bigger thing. So, when you make a decision, or you communicate as a team, people who are providing services, the government tends to ... listen, than when you sit as an island, like one person, you go within a system ... you cannot make a change.<sup>67</sup>

Dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the NGO sphere thus are of profound importance, not only for the question of who can lay claim to the benefits of NGO employment, but also for who is able to make themselves heard, with a 'soft voice', through the NGO platform.

### **'South Sudan is for everybody': civility as moral stance**

In the above accounts, the civilities practiced and promoted by interlocuters, as well as claims to a position outside politics, appeared as a primarily pragmatic stance. For some, however, a rejection of politics reflected a deeper moral stance, linked to efforts to distance oneself from the violence that has been done since 2013 in the service of politics and political ambition. Linked to this, in a context of deep divisions, including along

---

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 195.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 200.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 208.

<sup>66</sup>See note 2 above.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

ethnic lines, fomented and manipulated by politicians, one of the ways in which interlocuters made claims to ‘civility’ was to contest the ethnicisation of politics and to emphasise idea(l)s of national unity.

This was often evident in interlocuters’ narrations of their career histories. One young man, for example, had been involved in the SPLM as a student prior to the CPA, describing himself as having been, at that time, ‘very political’. After the CPA, he had been involved with an NGO as well as working for a government ministry. However, the crisis of 2013, he says, came ‘from the SPLM themselves, inside, the leaders . . . from that time, I stopped anything called politics or being attached with SPLM, everything stopped’. Instead, he says, the only thing to do is to focus on ‘human-to-human’ work. He is involved with a small, arts-focused NGO, mostly on a voluntary basis. He said, ‘I found myself as activist, as a local NGO, I can feel free to do my things, I can really found myself like I’m doing something positive for the people.’ He reflected,

If you want to do something to this country, you have to work in culture. You have to build an identity of the people of South Sudan, how they can work together and do things together. You just want to really let them feel like they are all South Sudanese.<sup>68</sup>

There were numerous other, similar, examples. Narratives of transitions into NGO work, either away from or as an alternative to politics, were often bound up with a deep sense of disillusionment with the country’s trajectory, as well as a desire to find other ways to provide services and contribute to the development of the new nation. Interlocuters often had ambitious visions for the kinds of changes they wanted to see, though these tended to be quite different from the short-term humanitarian projects they were mostly involved in implementing. In a statement echoing many others, the director of one, Juba-based women’s rights organisation said, ‘whatever we are doing, we are contributing to the nation building. We are also building South Sudan’.<sup>69</sup> There was also, often, a sense amongst interviewees that their broader aspirations – whether to provide services, or to bring people together around a more inclusive South Sudanese identity – were goals that could not be achieved at present through ‘politics’.

Interviewees frequently emphasised inclusivity and non-discrimination in their organisations, sometimes linking this to ideas of national unity, and to humanitarian impartiality. This is reflected in the references to ‘human-to-human work’, and to wanting people to feel that they are ‘all South Sudanese’. Similar themes recurred throughout interviews. Though resonating with other discussions of civility, this was also culturally and contextually specific, intimately connected to the hopes of South Sudanese independence, and to ideas of nationhood and national identity. Joseph, for example, emphasised his belief that ‘South Sudan is for everybody, not for one ethnicity’ and that this was reflected in his organisation’s work and hiring practices. He argued that ‘as long as you have a paper, you meet the criteria . . . if the person is willing to do that work serving the community, so, that person should not be subjected that “this person is not coming from this area”’.<sup>70</sup> In efforts to promote respect across lines of difference, interviewees often emphasised professionalism; as another director argued, for example, ‘I am one person who cannot tolerate an

---

<sup>68</sup>Interview, March 2020.

<sup>69</sup>See note 59 above.

<sup>70</sup>This formed part of a longer conversation about NGO hiring practices, a fraught and complex topic in South Sudan on which interviewees had varied and nuanced views.

environment where there is segregation, even if it is at the slightest level, because I want to do my professional work in a very free and fair environment'.<sup>71</sup>

In a context in which conflict has engendered deep divisions, including along ethnic lines, intentional efforts to project a unified national identity are potentially powerful. Yet, they also reflect the ambivalence of civility. Interlocutors often emphasised that they would not tolerate discrimination or division along ethnic or political lines but, by prioritising 'papers' – professional experience and educational qualifications – they risked replicating inequalities along the lines of rurality and class.

### Discussion: who speaks, who listens?

The above discussions raise an obvious question: who gets to speak, and make themselves heard, with a 'soft voice', through the NGO sphere? As Mitchell argues, those able to make themselves heard through 'soft speech' are often those to whom the state has already afforded a degree of recognition.<sup>72</sup> The appearance of civility can be 'a product of the knowledge that one's voice will be heard'; while 'repeated refusals of recognition can push those who are ignored or silenced towards forms of amplification in order to be heard more effectively'.<sup>73</sup> Analytical attention to 'civility' should thus be shifted, she suggests, away from individual comportment and towards the dynamics of political recognition that enable some to make themselves heard with 'soft speech'.<sup>74</sup>

In the examples discussed above, the role of state recognition is important in shaping who can make themselves heard with a 'soft voice'. This is seen in the comment that government 'listens' to NGOs. Such routes to influence are of course not available to the vast majority of South Sudan's citizenry, and NGOs are themselves not democratic institutions. In addition, NGOs depend on the consent of the government to operate; they cannot be too contentious, or their registration could be suspended. In the words of one interviewee, '[the government] have drawn a line whereby you should not cross. On this side, I'm only focusing on providing services, not to be a critic'.<sup>75</sup> Thus, as with many forms of civility, speaking with a 'soft voice' tends towards the status quo rather than any fundamental shift in power relations.

However, the norms and practices promoted by international donors and humanitarian agencies in South Sudan, over several decades, have also intimately shaped dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the NGO sphere and the balance of power in South Sudanese civil society more broadly, dictating who is able to use the NGO platform to make themselves heard with a 'soft voice'. Recognition by international agencies – in the form of funding and 'partnerships' – is pivotal in shaping who is able to leverage a role in service delivery for a degree of influence.

Dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in South Sudanese NGOs have been shaped by a donor system that has – in Jeffrey's words – 'set an exchange value for particular social and cultural traits and resources',<sup>76</sup> privileging the English speaking, urban and highly

<sup>71</sup>See note 2 above.

<sup>72</sup>Mitchell, 'Civility and Collective Action'.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 224, 232.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid.

<sup>75</sup>See note 59 above.

<sup>76</sup>Alex Jeffrey, 'The Geopolitical Framing of Localized Struggles: NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina', *Development and Change* 38, no. 2 (2007): 251–74, 253.

educated, and those with experience of and at ease in international organisations and fora. Trends towards professionalisation and managerialism have had a pervasive influence. Many of the national NGOs that have grown most quickly in South Sudan in recent years were set up by former staff of international organisations, already well-versed in their policies and procedures. They have quickly succeeded in securing funding, drawing on their knowhow, capital and connections, and have become trusted partners to international organisations. Donor reporting processes have influenced these trends; typically, only relatively large national NGOs with well-established financial systems, monitoring and evaluation processes, and a track record of audited reports, are able to fulfil complex donor requirements. In the words of the director of one of South Sudan's largest NGOs, 'the whole thing in the NGO world is compliance'.<sup>77</sup>

These dynamics have led to a deep sense of frustration and marginalisation amongst smaller, regionally based organisations. The founder of a small organisation in the country's south-west said, for example, that, 'The ones in Juba, national NGOs, take decisions always on our behalf, not our own voice, no consultation . . . they think, they are in the city, they feel like when they say anything, it is our voice down there'. He continued, 'if your organisation is in Juba, if you are connected to certain donors . . . you feel like you're the boss for others'.<sup>78</sup>

The tendency for international organisations to fund large, urban NGOs, with offices in the capital, founded and led by relatively well-connected individuals, replicate deeply entrenched patterns of inequality and exclusion in South Sudan that are, in turn, bound up with conflict in complex ways.<sup>79</sup> As highlighted above, conflict in South Sudan cannot be understood only through analyses of elite manoeuvrings; it is also linked to mounting injustices, grievances and inequalities within South Sudanese society, including 'profound wealth inequalities between the rural majority and certain urban centres'.<sup>80</sup>

The relationship between NGOs and dynamics of inequality and marginalisation in South Sudan was clearly articulated by one interviewee, who had worked for many years with international and national organisations. He described the advantages that 'having' an NGO can bring to a community in terms of both advocacy and income generation. National NGOs, he says, are 'mouthpieces' for the communities they operate in; as a result, 'if you have a certain community that have no local organisations, the issues, you know, conditions, the pains, the stresses, of certain communities, will not be advocated for'. NGOs bring in money through salaries, both within the organisation itself, and by supporting and training local youth who can then access employment in international organisations, enabling them to 'bring more money home'. Plus, since NGOs tend to cluster near to one another, staying, for example, in the compounds of established NGOs when seeking to set up operations in a new area, the presence of one NGO encourages the arrival of others, both South Sudanese and international. The corollary of all this is marginalisation of those areas that don't 'have' an NGO:

If you do not have people talking on your behalf, you don't have NGO who has hired people, you don't have most of your members who are working, so, there will be no income coming

---

<sup>77</sup>See note 2 above.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>For more on this latter point, see Kindersley, 'Military Livelihoods and the Political Economy in South Sudan'.

<sup>80</sup>Noel Stringham and Jonathan Forney, 'It Takes a Village to Raise a Militia: Local Politics, the Nuer White Army, and South Sudan's Civil Wars', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 55, no. 2 (2017): 177–99, 197.

into the community, your voices will not be heard, and over time you'll find yourself down in the pecking order.

He therefore emphasised that in decision-making – about which organisations to fund and where, and who to employ – ‘people need to work on the criteria of selection and be mindful that South Sudanese people are not equal’.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusions

Joseph's notion of speaking with a ‘soft voice’ encapsulates a particular form of civility that emerged across interviews, encompassing the careful ways of talking and acting, relationship-building, and intentionally ‘non-political’ positioning that enabled interlocuters to navigate a context of profound and pervasive political repression. This includes an emphasis on consensus-building and collaboration, rather than confrontation, in engagements with the government. This was partly a pragmatic stance, though it also reflected, at times, interlocuters' perspectives on the appropriate relationship between NGOs and the government, and on what constitutes effective advocacy (as seen in criticisms of more oppositional approaches), and thus involved ‘moral claims about politics and the ways in which power relations and inequalities can be contested in society’.<sup>82</sup>

This was not, however, civility for civility's sake, but rather civility as a route to something else, linked to efforts to create change in a highly militarised environment. Interviewees often narrated ambitious visions, linked to ideas of and aspirations for national unity, development and peace. These resonate with Badiey and Doll's point that, despite often-bleak predictions and the persistence of conflict, hopeful plans and visions for the future endure amongst many people in South Sudan – exposing ‘an alternative to viewing South Sudan as a state defined solely by political turmoil’.<sup>83</sup> In a context often defined by war and division, people are actively engaged in aspirational projects and efforts to create change and bridge differences.

These aspirations are potentially powerful, yet they are constrained by the exclusions and hierarchies of the humanitarian industry on which NGOs mostly depend for resources, and by the ambivalent position NGOs occupy in South Sudan's particular and deeply unequal political economy. They involve explicit efforts to overcome some forms of difference, including a disavowal of discrimination along ethnic and political lines, but at the same time, they risk replicating other divisions – including urban-rural divides, and divisions between those with and without formal educational qualifications. The research discussed here thus points to civility as a fundamentally fraught and ambivalent concept, recognising, in Anderson's words, that calls for civility can be involved in ‘envisaging new forms of citizenship and public life, while drawing their energy from sources that are implicated in other forms of hierarchy and exclusion’.<sup>84</sup>

The contradiction of claims to a ‘non-political’ position is that the work of NGOs is, of course, intimately political. Claims to being outside politics are political acts;<sup>85</sup> they

<sup>81</sup>See note 2 above.

<sup>82</sup>Schild and Santschi, ‘In/Civility in Peace and Conflict’, 2.

<sup>83</sup>Naseem Badiey and Christian Doll, ‘Planning amidst Precarity: Utopian Imaginings in South Sudan’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 12, no. 2 (2018): 367–85, 368.

<sup>84</sup>Anderson, ‘“Order” and “Civility”’, abstract.

<sup>85</sup>Brković, ‘Depoliticization “from Below”’.



redefine the boundary of the political to the debates of government and political elites, and function as a form of anti-politics, rendering political issues technical.<sup>86</sup> As gatekeepers to scarce employment, resources and services in a context of profound economic precarity, NGOs wield significant power, and are intimately involved in the negotiation of power relations; and this power is mostly exercised privately, not publicly. Meanwhile, constrained both by their reliance on international funding and by the threats facing anyone engaged in more overt activism in South Sudan, NGOs were mostly engaged in efforts to create smaller-scale changes rather than any kind of wider political transformation.

More fundamental change will come only with an expansion of civil space. In the meantime, however, international organisations should be aware that decisions about who to fund, where, and *how*, even for ostensibly apolitical, relief-oriented projects, are also highly political, with potential either to replicate or to challenge dynamics of inequality and marginalisation in South Sudanese (civil) society.

### Acknowledgments

I am incredibly grateful to everyone who gave up their time to participate in this research, and who has supported me in South Sudan. I am also very grateful to Naomi Pendle, Martina Santschi, Pascale Schild, Elizabeth Storer and Costanza Torre for their invaluable comments on drafts of this article. Funding for the article was provided through an ESRC PhD Studentship. The research was approved by the LSE Research Ethics Committee [ref. 000785].

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Funding

The work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council.

### Notes on contributor

*Alice Robinson* is a PhD candidate at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her doctoral research focuses on how South Sudanese NGOs navigate the international humanitarian industry, and on the dynamics of humanitarian 'localisation' in South Sudan.

### ORCID

Alice Robinson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6832-893X>

---

<sup>86</sup>Tania Murray Li, 'Politics, Interrupted', *Anthropological Theory* 19, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 29–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499618785330>.