

Beyond war in South Sudan

Despite poverty and the scars of war, peace mobilizers in South Sudan, the world's newest nation, courageously strive to address tensions and build peace.

BY GLADYS TERICHOW
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NINA LINTON



Peace committees can help communities figure out how to share scarce resources, such as water. From left, Grace Kide, Savia Tete and Betty Dudu laugh during a peace committee meeting in the Opari district.



At the only community well with clean drinking water in the Opari district, water cans hold families' places in line.

Each day in the Opari district of South Sudan—a region abandoned during decades of war and now resettled by some 6,500 people—women and children trek to the only community well with clean drinking water, some walking as far as 11 miles.

As they wait their turn in line, new and past tensions surface. Quarrels erupt, some over how much water each family takes. Others are rooted in the struggle to live as one community again after being scattered and displaced for years.

But neighbors such as Savia Tete are beginning to take action—using the skills they've learned through an MCC-supported community peace committee to find practical ways to overcome misunderstandings and build peace.

The country of South Sudan, which gained independence

from Sudan in July 2011 and became the world's newest nation, is still reeling from decades of civil war that left some 2 million people dead and displaced 4 million more.

The peace agreement that ended the 1983–2005 war paved the way for thousands of people to return home, but it has not brought peace at the community level.

During the war, South Sudanese often were united by the conflict with the north and their desire for independence, says MCC worker Jennifer Schutzman of Edgewood, Ky.

Now, older ethnic divisions and tensions within South Sudan are beginning to surface. As people return after decades away, conflicts arise over the past and present, including resources, where people will resettle and how to rebuild a devastated land.

“People think independence is peace and it's not,” Schutzman says. “Independence has brought confusion. People are arriving with high expectations—where is my



Jennifer Schutzman, MCC program support officer, right, and Gladys Mananyu, regional justice and peace officer for Sudan Council of Churches, center, speak at an Opari peace committee meeting.

school, my clinic, my clean water and sewage system? But most issues remain to be resolved and infrastructure and basic necessities are lacking throughout.”

Recognizing the tensions, the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC), with funding from MCC, has established community peace committees in Opari and nine other communities in South Sudan and Sudan, each with a leader chosen by the committee and a community peace mobilizer provided by the SCC.

The SCC trains committee members such as Tete in peace-building and conflict resolution and remains in touch with them as they act for peace in their own communities. MCC supports the effort with funding and through the work of Schutzman, who serves as a support officer for the peacebuilding program.

“The goal is to help people resolve their problems at the community level,” says Gladys Mananyu, who is responsible for SCC’s peace and justice programs in Opari and the surrounding areas. “Bringing people back to a normal life is a big challenge. It is hard but there is hope—many believe that the way of the Christian life and

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the church can bring them back to a normal life.”

In 1994, most residents fled Opari, a district about 60 miles southeast of Juba, South Sudan. Many went to refugee camps in Uganda, some hid in the bush.

While they were gone, nature reclaimed the main road, fields, gardens, homes, the school and health center.

The first families returned in 2008. Today, new mud brick houses with thatched roofs and newly planted fields and gardens bring a sense of normalcy. But the main road remains in poor condition and a tree is growing in the collapsed mud brick building that once was the health center. A new school was built in 2010 but is not usable because the roof blew off in a storm.

Families’ lives are taken up with daily survival, including trips to the well for water. Although the district has three wells, two only function during the rainy season. Now, only the well close to Tete’s house has clean drinking water, and all must figure out how to share it.

At a recent peace committee meeting, Tete reported that she had used her skills as a peacebuilder to help the community create new guidelines on water usage at the well and form a water management committee to enforce them.

Each family can now fill two containers of water at one time. Those with more containers must go to the back of the line and wait for another turn. To reduce fluctuations in the water supply and make the most efficient use of the pumping mechanisms, the pumping station is closed for two hours every afternoon.

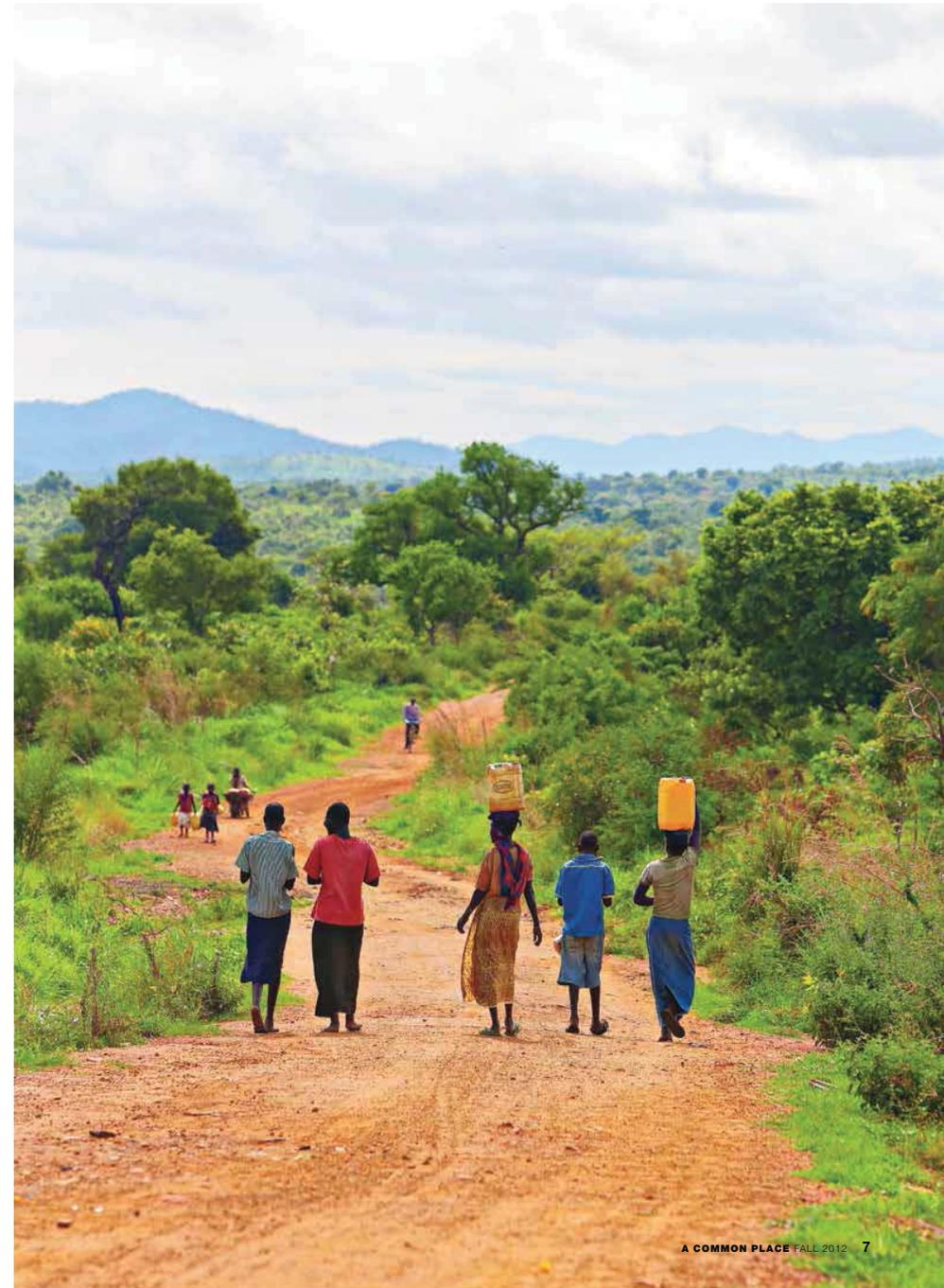
“There is now more order at the well,” Tete says. Not only has the quarrelling stopped, women are now building friendships and showing more interest in talking with her about the positive changes that can happen when conflicts are resolved in nonviolent ways.

This is only part of the change that a five-year MCC campaign, “Sudan: Coming Home,” is bringing in South Sudan and Sudan.

Thanks to the generosity of donors, the campaign, which began in April 2008 and runs through March 2013, provided the funding needed for MCC to ramp up programming in areas such as peace, livelihood, food and HIV and AIDS education and care.

Women carry water home from the well in Opari district.

Rubble and new buildings exist side by side in Opari district, South Sudan.





Jerisa Muro holds her daughter Ester Keji, 2, as she practices sewing techniques. Go to acommonplace.mcc.org to see more images from this project.



Rose David

In the capital city of South Sudan, Juba, MCC is partnering with the Episcopal Church of Sudan Mother's Union Women's Empowerment Project to help women learn tailoring skills.

The project, which started in 2009, offers six months of training in sewing, life skills and small-business management. It also allows graduates to purchase sewing machines at a reduced rate.

The effort makes a striking difference for women such as Rose David, who has six children ages 1 to 13. Before, she says, "when the children came home from school, we had nothing to eat." Now that she is working, her children have enough food and can receive medical care, when needed.

And it can help women build a better future for their families. "I didn't go to school because of the long war," says Jerisa Muro, a mother of four. "I want my children to go to school so that they can get good jobs and when I'm old, they can assist me."

MCC in South Sudan and Sudan

MCC's work in this region grows out of more than four decades of partnership with Sudanese churches, beginning with the Sudan Council of Churches in 1972. During the civil war, MCC worked with Sudanese church organizations to distribute food aid and support peacemaking efforts. Today, thanks in part to the Sudan: Coming Home cam-

paign, which began in April 2008 and runs through March 2013, MCC has increased programming in vocational and leadership training, peace work, trauma healing, food relief, agriculture projects and HIV and AIDS education and care. The majority of this work is in South Sudan, though MCC also continues to support partners in Sudan.

Rose David measures second-time customer Mary Augustino. David puts her newly acquired tailoring skills to work at her

home, where she sews, meets with customers and cares for her children (from left) Moses, 6, Ester, 3, and Daniel, 7.



But children's chances for education, women's opportunities to make a living and a community's ability to rebuild all fare better in times of peace.

While the civil war has ended, hostilities between ethnic groups continue. Ongoing unrest and violence make it very difficult for community leaders to provide more services, such as health and education, and to improve infrastructure such as water systems, says Mananyu.

In western Sudan in the South Kordofan region, three peace committees trained by SCC can no longer meet due to armed conflict and bombings, which are sparking a growing humanitarian crisis.

Yet the longing for peace is strong, fueled by people's experiences of war. "When I talk with people about peace-building, that desire for peace comes from their heart,"

Mananyu says. "The seeds of peace come from them. It comes from their own understanding that peace will open ways for development. They realize that they cannot talk about development if they can't live in harmony."

And day by day, peace committee members and community peace mobilizers work to bring harmony and live out an example of hope. In Opari, committee members talk about peace as not needing revenge, as doing good to those who hate you.

Or, as Tete says, "peace is loving your neighbor as yourself."

Gladys Terichow is a writer for MCC Canada. Nina Linton is a freelance photographer from Prince Edward Island, Canada.

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James Morris

A community peace mobilizer in South Sudan talks about growing up in a culture of war and his current work for peace.

AS TOLD TO GLADYS TERICHOW

My whole life I have known war. I was born in 1979 in Magwi County in what is now South Sudan. My mother and father divorced when I was little, and I grew up with my mother and stepfather.

I was 9 years old when my stepfather was killed. It was 1987.

At 5 o'clock in the morning, we heard guns. I hid in the riverbed with my stepfather, mother, elder brother, sister, cousin and uncle through the day. At 3 that afternoon, we heard whistling. My stepfather thought it was a signal that it was safe to come out, but it was the soldiers who were whistling. They lined up the men and boys.

With the first bullet they killed my stepfather. They killed my elder brother and shot my uncle and cousin, who died later from their wounds. They shot at me but missed. I fell down and they shot two more times. Every bullet missed me. They wanted to shoot a fourth time but the commander said, "leave the boy alone, it is not his time to die."

My mother, sister and I were taken to the barracks. My stepfather's brother found us there and pleaded with the

soldiers to let us go. The commander warned us that if we went back to our village they would slaughter us. But the next day my mother said we needed to go back home to see the grave. People from the village had heard the sound of guns and found the bodies and buried them together.

Everyone in the village ran away at that time. We settled in Pageri, a one-day walk away. We had no food and there was a lot of suffering. We went hiding in the bush so many times that I don't remember how many. There was no time for cultivating the land.

In 1990, my birth father was killed. He was a doctor and they said he had given medicine to the other army. Then I felt a lot of anger. My father, stepfather, brother, uncle and cousin had all been killed. I felt I must get revenge so I joined the army, but my uncle and my mom brought me back home.

The next year, when I was about 12

“ I knew that if I wanted to be a peacebuilder, I had to heal myself first. ”

years old, I began to reflect on what happened. How long would I keep this anger in my heart? What was the reason why I was not killed? Why did three bullets miss me? Then I realized that God has a purpose for me. If it was not for God's protection, I would have been killed. At this time, I got involved in the church, sang in the choir, played instruments and praised God.

In 1994, the government of Khartoum bombed the whole area and we ran away. My mother stayed in the border town of Nimule, and I went to a refugee settlement in Uganda with my mother's sister. Life became a little easier. We cultivated land and had enough food. I went to school. In this camp were children of one of the soldiers who killed my father. I felt angry every time I saw these children. Then we were taken to another camp and I didn't see them anymore. That made it easier to forget.

I eventually came back to Nimule, where my mother lived. In 2002, the



leaders of my congregation, the Apostolic Church of Sudan, saw my commitment to live in peace with others and sent me to Bible college in Uganda.

In 2007, when the Sudan Council of Churches asked churches to select people for training on peacebuilding and resolving conflicts, my church chose me to attend. At this training, I shared my story, and I began to realize that I had a lot of conflict in myself.

I knew that if I wanted to be a peacebuilder, I had to heal myself first. I decided from then on I would not hate the people who killed my father.

If I want to be a peacemaker I need a heart of forgiveness. I asked God to take away that anger. Forgiveness is a process and when I feel discouraged I read the Bible. If you don't forgive the offender, you hold the anger. You have to release the anger. For me to live in peace, I had to let the anger go.

I'm so glad that I did not seek revenge for the killings. If you go for revenge, it is very risky because you become the enemy. You lose more than you gain.

Today, I am a builder, but I spend most of my time helping people resolve conflict. There are so many conflicts in

South Sudan. I want to use my experiences and training to build peace.

My hope is for people in South Sudan to live in peace. If we don't live in peace, there won't be any development—no roads, no communication, no access to water or to schools. We are free at last. It is our work to build peace.

James Morris of Nimule, South Sudan, is a community peace mobilizer for the Sudan Council of Churches, an MCC partner. Gladys Terichow is a writer for MCC Canada.