

UNMISS County Support Bases: Peacekeeping–Peacebuilding Nexus at Work?

Diana Felix da Costa and Cedric de Coning

Summary

The initiative by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to establish County Support Bases (CSBs) in 35 counties, in addition to the presence it already has in 10 state capitals, reflects a new interest in UN peacekeeping operations in pursuing a greater nexus between peacekeeping and peacebuilding, especially at the local level. In principle, the CSBs are a positive development, representing a move towards focusing on areas where the need is greatest – but they have also given rise to several concerns. Internally, UNMISS has had to reassess how fast it can move and what it can achieve with the CSBs. The CSBs are intended to ‘facilitate the extension of state authority’, and serve as a vehicle for integration with the UN Country Team (UNCT), who are the ones who can actually bring tangible development and peace dividends to isolated rural areas. Externally, the CSBs are expected to have an enabling effect on the extension of state authority through co-location of UNMISS staff with government counterparts in the counties. Given the delays encountered in CSB construction, it is not yet possible to fully assess their impact, although partial presence and air movement has already facilitated what is often the only link between state authorities and rural communities. This policy brief focuses on exploring the conceptual thinking and vision behind the CSBs, the efforts to achieve greater integration between UNMISS and UNCT, the challenges UNMISS has been facing in developing the CSBs, and how the UN plans to use CSBs in the future.

Introduction¹

There is an emerging understanding within the United Nations that the ‘peacekeeping–peacebuilding nexus’ is an artificial divide: in practice, peacekeepers serve as early peacebuilders. Peacekeeping has developed from a mostly military model of observing cease-fires, to featuring a combination of military, police and civilian capabilities to support the implementation of comprehensive peace agreements and assist in setting the foundations for sustainable peace consolidation and legitimate governance. However, the peacekeeping–peacebuilding nexus, and what it means to UN peacekeeping missions in practice, remains under-explored, with little research or policy work dedicated to thinking about what can be done to ensure that peacekeeping serves as a catalyst for peacebuilding, especially below the national level.

The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was established on 8 July 2011 by UN Security Council Resolution 1996 under a Chapter VII mandate to assist the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GoRSS) ‘to consolidate peace and security’ and to extend and strengthen state authority. In line with its mandate, UNMISS is a decentralized mission with most of its staff planned to be deployed at state and county levels.

- 1 This policy brief is partly based on NUPI research conducted in October/November 2011, and more recently on interviews with UNMISS and other UN personnel conducted by Diana Felix da Costa in Juba, South Sudan, in December 2012 and January 2013.
- 2 See United Nations 2012. *Peace: Keep it. Build it. The Contribution of United Nations Peacekeeping to Early Peacebuilding: Strategy*. UN DPKO & DFS, New York.

What are the County Support Bases?

To this end, UNMISS plans to establish 35 County Support Bases (CSBs). These are an enabling and facilitating tool intended to support peace consolidation, the extension of state authority and the building of national capacities to enable service delivery to rural populations. Accordingly, the aim of the CSB portals is to strengthen local government presence and capacity at the county level through co-location of UNMISS staff with county authorities, and importantly, to facilitate a greater presence of UNCT and development partners.

The CSB concept is two-pronged: on the one hand, to provide accommodation using UNMISS resources; on the other hand, to operate as a community ‘portal’, built by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). UNMISS staff will be living at the CSB accommodation, but its civilian staff and police are expected to be co-located with local authorities, depending on local circumstances and buy-in.³ In addition to co-location, CSB personnel are expected to conduct frequent field missions, with travel and provision of support to surrounding counties.

Guidance on interaction and co-location with local counterparts and authorities is in the process of being finalized, but the mission has taken seriously its community engagement strategy. For example, in order to avoid the usual contrast where UN structures have fuel and energy whereas the local community has little or none, there are plans to develop parallel community projects. The Indian Government has pledged to provide solar power for local authorities, health centres and schools, while UN-Habitat will support CSB locations by introducing piped water systems.

A CSB is expected to facilitate the work of mission components, and although staffing will be adapted to local circumstances, each CSB will have approximately 20–25 personnel. This will include various substantive personnel such as Civil Affairs, Human Rights, Corrections, a Recovery, Re-integration and Peace-building (RRP) officer, as well as up to ten UN police officers and three or four military liaison officers, in addition to administrative support staff.

Each CSB will be complemented by a ‘devel-

opment portal’, envisioned as ‘the door to the community’, to strengthen county authorities through improved infrastructure. The portals, funded jointly by Norway and the Netherlands, and being built by UNDP, are intended to create a centre that will enable the government and the community to interact.

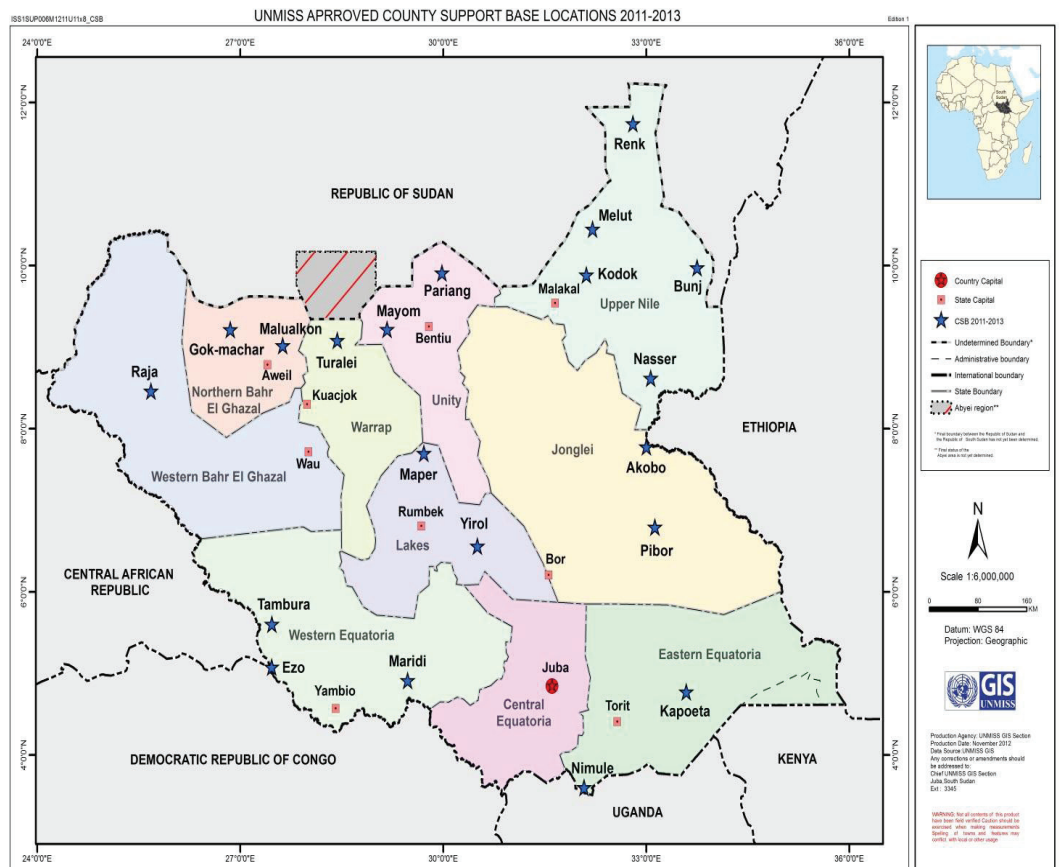
The CSBs are also expected to act as a hub to encourage UN agencies, funds and programmes and NGOs to operate in remote areas, by providing regular transport links to the county level, as well as and physical office and accommodation space. CSB locations will automatically have UNMISS flights twice a week, in order to facilitate the presence of both government and other aid actors. Depending on the security environment, UNMISS will have its military elements located separately, but close to the CSB.

Where are the CSBs?


South Sudan consists of ten states composed of 79 counties. The old UNMIS had significant presence in the three sector headquarters of Juba, Wau and Malakal. When South Sudan became independent on 9 July 2011 and UNMIS was succeeded by UNMISS, the mission expanded its presence to a further seven states. In addition to UNMISS bases in all ten state capitals, it was then planned to have a presence in another 35 counties, increasing the UNMISS presence to 45 of a total 79 counties and, when completed, ultimately covering about 56% of the country.

In principle, the selection of the locations of the CSBs was discussed with governors, county commissioners and communities, and eventually reviewed and

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³ See UN Security Council Resolution 1996 (2011), paragraph 22.



approved by the Council of Ministers in 2011, on the basis of three criteria. These were: 1) conflict-prone areas – where conflict had been recently experienced, enduring or had a greater impact; 2) areas receiving large numbers of returnees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and demobilized SPLA; and 3) areas with a potential for economic recovery with multiplier effects.

By December 2012 four CSBs were considered to be operational.⁴ All four took over previously established and fully functioning UNMIS team sites. Nine CSBs are planned for completion during the 2013 dry season that runs roughly from December 2012 to March 2013; these include high-profile locations like Pibor and Akobo counties in Jonglei State. Several of these take over former Referendum Support Bases (RSBs) locations established as temporary sites by UNMIS to support the January 2011 referendum that culminated in the independence of South Sudan.

Learning from the past?

There is much to be learnt from the RSBs. UNMIS originally planned to have one RSB in every county of South Sudan. In fact, they managed to develop 28. Similarly, UNMISS had originally planned to develop the 35 CSBs over a period of three years, with 19 CSBs expected to be operational within the first year in 2012. Early enthusiasm has now given way to less ambitious plans, and the 35 CSBs are now expected to be built up gradually over five years, leading up to 2016. Several within the mission now argue that even the 35 envisioned CSBs are too ambitious, and indicate 20 as more realistic figure.

In practice, the development of the CSBs has been delayed by over-ambitious planning, logistical and bureaucratic challenges, and unmet planning assumptions. According to one UNMISS official, the mission also gave priority to mission air assets originally intended for transporting materials for building CSBs, to support the protection of civilians and the provision of humanitarian relief.

The lack of roads and infrastructure means that both personnel and construction equipment have to be flown in. This is compounded by the long rainy season that isolates much of the country for half the year. However, these are well-known facts that could have been given greater prominence in the planning process. Conversely, UNMISS has had little control over the (un)availability of financial resources or the delays in receiving equipment and building material from the now-liquidated UNMIS. Further challenges have come from the lack of engineering capacity at the mission as well as delays in transferring engineering assets from the liquidated United Nations Mission to the Central African Republic and Chad. The mission has been running at less than half its planned engineering capacity. The deployment of an additional engineering contingent from South Korea with greater geographical flexibility is now expected to speed up construction of the remaining CSBs.

Looking ahead

In principle, the CSBs are an excellent concept that reflect the principle of being present where the need is greatest. In practice, they have proven to be a challenging endeavour. Despite all its years of experience from multiple missions, the planning and management culture of the UN still seems to result in unrealistic and over-ambitious plans. DPKO appears especially poor at distinguishing between plans that serve political and strategic objectives and plans that have to be operationally implemented. The original planning suffered from over-optimistic expectations, including not taking full account of known factors such as predictable climatic conditions. Although UNMISS has now adopted a more sober approach, and has reassessed what it can achieve, planning still seems too ad hoc and optimistic, in view of the logistical challenges encountered thus far.

Given the isolation of many of the counties, local authorities are keen to have CSBs established in their areas. The CSBs and UNMISS regular flights offer the government, the UNCT and other development partners the opportunity for regular visits to these otherwise largely inaccessible areas. However, if the CSBs are to be relevant, and contribute to sustainable capacity at the local level, their everyday relationships with the local authorities will be critical. Their success depends on full buy-in both from the GoRSS, politically and all the way to the county level, and from the UNCT. For such support to be meaningful and sustainable, it will need to be provided at a pace that the mission can actually deliver on expectations. This may require the mission to reduce the footprint envisaged for the CSBs, and to ensure that clear guidelines are in place. The CSBs will need to coordinate their work closely with the GoRSS, and ensure that they complement and support, not substitute the work of their local counterparts.

In supporting the GoRSS, UNMISS should be wary of not undermining and weakening other legitimate existing local structures of authority. UNMISS's support to the extension of state authority will inevitably impact on the local political economy and the relationship between the state, customary authorities and the communities. Measures must be put in place for monitoring and mitigating against unintended negative consequences.⁵ Importantly, this involves understanding and engaging more thoroughly with cattle-camp communities, especially in terms of education and alternative livelihoods.

The CSBs should serve as a vehicle for integration, facilitating the presence of UNCT and other humanitarian and development actors. Through its 90-plus RRP officers and logistical support, through flights and accommodation, the mission seeks to have an 'enabling' role for UN agencies, funds and programmes. UNMISS's added-value is its staff, 'thousands of us, which UN agencies cannot afford to have', as one UNMISS official noted. Peacekeeping operations have person-

⁴ Maridi in Western Equatoria State, Raja in Western-Bahr-Ghazal State, and Melut and Nasser in Upper Nile State.

⁵ C. Aoi, C. de Coning and R. Thakur (eds), 2007. *Unintended Consequences of Peacekeeping Operations*, Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

nel, material and financial resources. The UNCT have the programmatic capacity, access to programmatic funds and a longer-term perspective, but limited staff and country presence. The UNMISS budget is USD 839 million per year; the mission has over 1400 cars and roughly 10,000 people throughout the country. However, as with all UN peacekeeping budgets, most of the UNMISS budget is not available for development tasks and projects. UNMISS's human rights monitoring and support to capacity development must come alongside peace dividends and development. UNCT should make use of the CSBs and their logistics to reach out where it is most needed, even though some in South Sudan argue that UNMISS has become too politically compromised for the UNCT to work closely with them.⁶ Moving beyond agency turf-issues and joining forces must be the way forward.

At present, most CSBs are still not fully operational, and many of the guiding documents have only recently been finalized. It is therefore not yet possible to offer a full assessment of their impact and trickle-down effects. NUPI is keen to continue following the development of the CSBs, and to observe how UN personnel in CSBs establish relationships and interact with society and local authorities. Co-location with local authorities is a sound way forward, but it remains to be seen to what degree UNMISS personnel will be allowed and willing to leave their air-conditioned offices and accommodation units, to be co-located in the same, often less-equipped, conditions as their government counterparts.

4 UNMISS needs to ensure that it avoids creating a culture of fortified compounds where staff is hostage to UN security rules, and end up out of touch with the local societies and the local authorities that they have been tasked to assist.⁷ Aware of this danger, the SRSG

6 J. Hemmer, 2013. 'We are laying the groundwork for our own failure' The UN Mission in South Sudan and its civilian protection strategy: an early assessment, *CRU Policy Brief* No. 25, Clingendael Institute & NOREF

has made it very clear that CSBs should be well integrated in the communities, at walking distance from the county commissioner's office, and should avoid large fortified compound walls.⁸ What is less clear, however, is what will happen when these principles and co-location do not meet the UN Department of Safety and Security's strict Minimum Operational Security Standards (MOSS). While the mission's leadership has been adamant about changing the way security is approached in the UN, they may, in reality, have limited influence on how some aspects of a large bureaucracy like the UN is run, especially those aspects that are informed by system-wide considerations, such as insurance policies.

The CSBs constitute an attempt by the UN mission to be more decentralized and closer to local populations. This represents an opportunity to reduce their sense of isolation and marginalization. However, unless the CSBs can maintain the perception of the UN's neutrality, facilitate development and service delivery and produce tangible peace dividends for local populations, they may contribute to disillusionment and a loss of confidence in the UN and local authorities alike. Managing expectations will be crucial: this also relates to how the UNCT and other development partners plan to make use of the CSBs for their own more long-term plans, in terms of supporting livelihoods, education and health.

The CSBs are thus important for following and measuring how well UNMISS manages to implement its mandate in South Sudan; how integration and coordination between the mission and the UNCT evolves; and more broadly, how the DPKO's traditionally militaristic structures and rigid bureaucracy are managing to adapt to the new peacekeeping–peacebuilding nexus.

7 M. Duffield, 2010. 'Risk-Management and the Fortified Aid Compound: Everyday Life in Post-Interventionary Society', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, vol. 4, no. 4: 453–474.

8 Interview with SRSG Hilde F. Johnson, January 2013.

The research was made possible through a grant from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs through the Training for Peace in Africa Programme (TFP).



NUPI

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
P.O. Box 8159 Dep, N-0033 Oslo, Norway
www.nupi.no

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About the Authors

Diana Felix da Costa is an associate researcher at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs and a PhD candidate at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London. She is currently conducting her PhD fieldwork in Jonglei State, South Sudan.

Cedric de Coning heads the Peace Operations and SSR Research Group at NUPI and is an advisor to the peacekeeping and peacebuilding units at ACCORD. He has a PhD from the Department of Philosophy at Stellenbosch University.