

# PEACEBUILDING PYRAMID: THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN POST-CIVIL WAR PEACE EFFORTS IN SOUTHERN SUDAN

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**Abstract** - *This study aims to unveil the role of religious leaders in the civil war efforts in South Sudan. This research employed the peacebuilding pyramid approach proposed by Lederach. The data were obtained through literature studies from books, scientific articles, documents, online media, and official reports published by government and non-government institutions relevant to peacebuilding in South Sudan. The article argues that religious leaders have played an important role in peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan since the conflict emerged in 2013. This study revealed several findings; first, at the top leadership, religious leaders act as mediators between the two conflicting parties, marked by the success of the 2018 RARCSS agreement. Second, middle-range leadership focuses on mobilizing the community and advocating for peace. Third, in the grassroots leadership section, religious leaders focus their attention on counseling and empowering communities affected by war both directly and indirectly. Through the mapping of the peacebuilding*

*pyramid model, the presence of religious leaders in the community has positively influenced the peace process in South Sudan. This paper contributes to peace studies using Lederach's peacebuilding pyramid model approach.*

**Keywords:** *Peacebuilding Pyramid; Civil War; Peace; Religious Leaders, South Sudan.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, peace studies and conflict resolution have attracted much attention from scholars (Ndeche & Iroye, 2022). Peace studies bring new concepts and perspectives to the study of International Relations that focus on understanding, analyzing, and solving problems related to conflict, war, and peace (Galtung, 2010). War and peace are complex and dynamic problems inseparable from the interaction between actors in global politics. The complexity is characterized by the

emergence of new actors, involving not only state actors but also non-state actors (Hadiwinata, 2017). These non-state actors play an important role in the constellation of international politics and security in the era of globalization, such as groups of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international media, and transnational actors (individual figures with global influence). The emergence of these transnational actors globally affects the dynamics of international relations, especially in the context of peace studies (Aji & Indrawan, 2019).

South Sudan was designated as the world's youngest nation in 2011, the first time the people of South Sudan experienced becoming one nation (Jok, 2020). However, the joy of the people only lasted a few years (Grabska, 2013; Pendle, 2021). In 2013, South Sudan faced a civil war triggered by a power struggle between President Salva Kiir (of Dinka ethnicity) and Vice President Riek Machar (of Nuer ethnicity) (Modi et al., 2019a). These two political leaders are the key actors responsible for the conflicts due to political problems in South Sudan. It indicates that political tensions, power struggles, and controversial political decisions have been the main triggers of the conflict in the country (Wagner, 2014).

Violence and insurgency quickly spread to military bases and other areas (Blanchard, 2013). The civil war lasted for more than 20 years continuously, forcing people to flee to neighboring countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda (McNamee & Muyangwa, 2020; UNHCR, 2023; Wilson, 2019). The people of South Sudan have been victims of widespread human rights violations, including ethnically targeted violence, extrajudicial killings, sexual and gender-based violence, recruitment and use of children in armed groups, and attacks on health facilities,

schools, patients, and medical staff (Ensor, 2022; Mayai, 2022; McNamee & Muyangwa, 2020; Wilson, 2019).

During civil wars, international, local and religious actors have played an essential role as peacemakers (Akey, 2018; Da Costa, 2023; Verjee, 2022). This fact depicts that these actors have participated in peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan. The important role of religious leaders highlights the "strategic peacebuilding" approach, recognizing the complexity of conflict and the importance of engaging multiple actors and strategies to achieve sustainable peace (Kane, 2014; Zink, 2017). One of the outcomes of religious leaders' engagement was mediating the signing of a peace agreement in September 2018, known as the R-ARCSS (Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan). This agreement, signed by Presidents Kiir and Machar to prevent a return to conflict, took place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (Modi et al., 2019b; Stamnes & de Coning, 2022).

Then, what caught the authors' attention while the country was newly independent and struggling to build a new government, the emergence of civil war caused prolonged internal chaos in South Sudan. In addition to regional actors, religious actors and institutions have remained active during the period of violence and chaos since 2013 in South Sudan. Religious leaders serve as a critical tool in uniting the entire South Sudanese society, ending the conflict, and achieving sustainable peace both within communities and nationally. However, Christian and Muslim religious leaders represent most religious leaders. Hence, the authors try to map the peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan carried out by religious leaders using the peacebuilding pyramid model. Studies on peacebuilding in South Sudan are still limited; not many researchers have conducted in-depth research on

peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan, especially in the civil war conflict. To see this, this article analyzes the involvement of religious leaders in peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan.

Many researchers and scholars have conducted studies on peace efforts in South Sudan, including research written by (Bedigen, 2022) entitled “A quest for sustainable peace in South Sudan: the role of everyday religious practices, ceremonies and rituals in robust peacebuilding,” stating that the practice of everyday peace ceremonies and rituals from indigenous peoples and other religious cultures in South Sudan can be an important initiative in building strong peace in the region. The relationship between socio-religious practices, often overlooked in NSCC peacebuilding efforts, has a key role to play in achieving sustainable peace in South Sudan.

Then, research written by (Ashworth & Ryan, 2013) entitled “One Nation from Every Tribe, Tongue, and People: The Church and Strategic Peacebuilding in South Sudan” suggests that the church had an extraordinary public role during the conflict period in South Sudan. Although conditions in the country were extremely difficult during the 22-year civil war, the church remained the only institution consistently present and functioning for the people. While the conflict eroded the government, civil society, international organizations, and local authorities, the church remained at the center of society, providing a range of services and support normally expected from the government.

Furthermore, research written by (Modi et al., 2019a) entitled “South Sudan’s Costly Conflict and the Urgent Role of Religious Leaders” indicates that religious leaders have moral and spiritual duties and urgent social responsibilities in South Sudan. They are expected to take a role in mobilizing all

parties to the conflict to work together to build peace and prosperity for the nation of South Sudan. By referring to religious voices as “Prophetic

Voices” that need to be listened to, the statement asserts that this is a critical time for South Sudan, and religious leaders must be the voices that inspire change.

Meanwhile, research written by (Basedau & Koos, 2015) entitled “When Do Religious Leaders Support Faith-Based Violence? Evidence from a Survey Poll in South Sudan” implies that individual demographic or biographical factors do not influence support for faith-based violence but are more related to their religious attitudes. Religious leaders who are more tolerant of other religions and have secular attitudes tend to reject violence. Interestingly, however, interfaith activities do not reduce support for violence but rather increase understanding of peace.

In addition, research written by (Kane, 2014) entitled “Ritual formation of peaceful publics: Sacrifice and syncretism in South Sudan (1991-2005)” explains how religious rituals, especially bull sacrifice, were adopted as a way to achieve peace between the Dinka and Nuer tribes during the conflict in Sudan. These rituals involved the participation of various parties, including church leaders and kinship authorities, who formed public alliances between them. Through ritual analysis, the authors highlight that those religious rituals enabled the emergence of new forms of politics based on peaceful coexistence and shared identity between the Dinka and Nuer, which differ from the politics of rebel movements or kinship politics usually centered on ethnic sentiments.

Finally, research written by (Bedigen, 2020) entitled “Significance of Societal Customs in the South Sudan Civil War Resolution” denotes that it is important to consider the role of societal customs in conflict resolution in South Sudan, especially



Specifically, the qualitative research data analysis encompassed data reduction, carried out through the selection of data with the same category, and focused on the phenomenon of civil war in South Sudan through the concept of a peacebuilding pyramid. The reduced data could provide a clearer picture and facilitate in finding of further data (Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018).

Furthermore, data presentation (display data) was conducted through data classification related to the theme of South Sudan's peace efforts. After reducing the data, it is necessary to present the data to facilitate drawing conclusions. Finally, the conclusion was acquired by answering the problems proposed. These conclusions were obtained after reducing the data and presenting temporary conclusions put forward in the hypothesis. However, they can be changed if later data and supporting evidence are discovered at the data collection stage.

### III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This article focuses on the efforts of religious leaders as a strong pillar in peacebuilding in South Sudan. To understand the peacebuilding efforts in South Sudan, Lederach's pyramid model was utilized. This model provides a holistic analytical framework that considers the role of religious leaders and the peacebuilding approaches taken by these actors. The application of Lederach's pyramid model to peacebuilding activities in South Sudan is as follows:

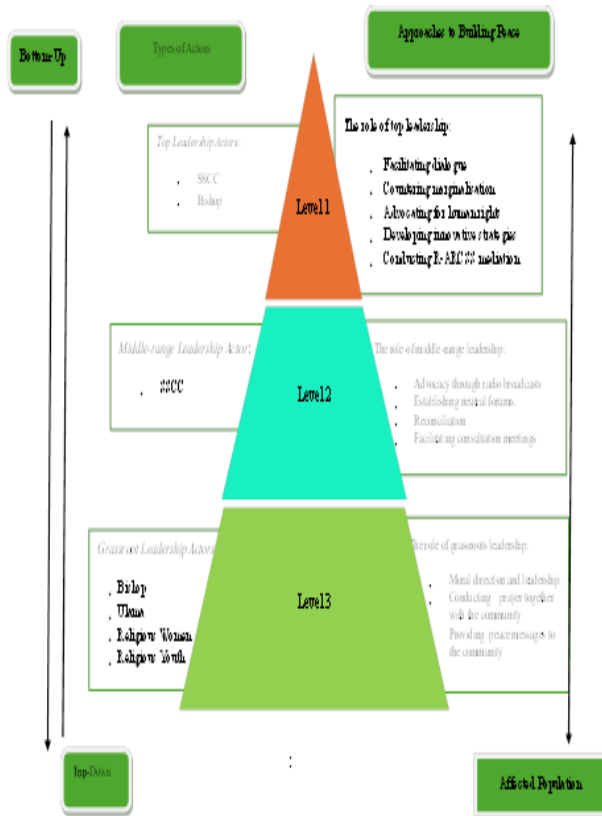


Figure 3. Illustration of South Sudan's Peacebuilding Pyramid

Source: Processed by the Authors

### An Overview Peacebuilding Pyramid-John Paul Lederach

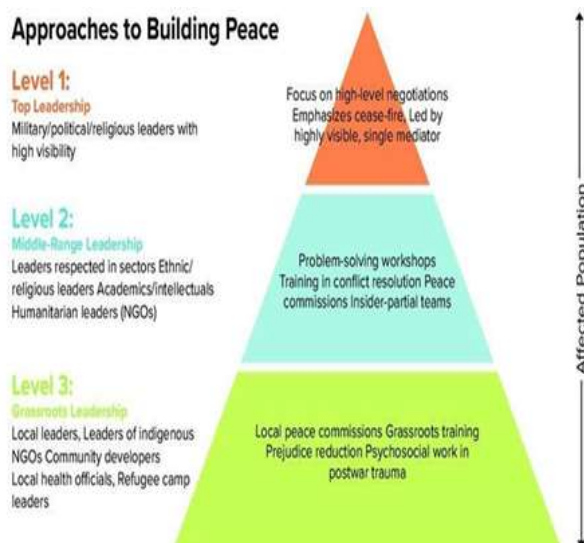
The pyramid model of peacebuilding refers to a framework developed by leading peacebuilding expert John Paul Lederach. The model is placed in the category of transformative peacebuilding due to its focus on fundamental and comprehensive changes in the relationships, structures, and paradigms underlying conflict.

Peacebuilding, according to Lederach (1997), is "a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the various processes, approaches, and stages necessary to transform conflicts toward more sustainable and peaceful relationships" (Lederach, 1997). The concept of

peacebuilding emphasized by Lederach is inspired by the critical view of peace in International Relations (IR) studies. In IR studies, peace is often understood not only as the absence of physical conflict but also as a deeper condition of sustained harmony, justice and well-being among individuals, societies and states. Critical approaches to peace highlight the importance of addressing the root causes of conflict and structural inequalities that may cause or exacerbate conflict (Andris & Tambunan, 2023; Farizan & Heryadi, 2021; Jok, 2020).

Lederach extended this concept into the practical domain by introducing the concept of peacebuilding, which encompasses more than just ending fighting or war (Lederach, 1997). Rather, it encompasses efforts to change conflict dynamics, rebuild damaged relationships, and create the foundations for sustainable peace through various processes, approaches, and stages involving all levels of actors. Lederach's pyramid model offers a structured way to analyze peacebuilding effort by identifying key actors involved in the conflict and their roles, as follow:

- a. **Top Leadership Actors:** At the top are leaders or top-level actors who are prominent and visible in the public eye. They include political leaders, military figures, and other high-ranking officials who often play a critical role in determining the course of the conflict and peace process. They have the power to make decisions that affect the entire population affected by the conflict.
- b. **Middle-range Leadership:** Below the top-level actors are mid-level leaders who come from various sectors, such as religious leaders, academics, or community organizers. These individuals often have connections with both top-level and grassroots actors. Although they are not directly involved in high-level political struggles, they play an important role in mediating conflicts, mobilizing communities, and advocating for peace. They bridge the gap between elites and grassroots and often influence both.
- c. **Grassroots Leadership:** At the bottom of the pyramid is grassroots leadership, which consists of individuals and groups closest to the neighborhood and directly affected by the conflict. It includes members of local NGOs, community leaders, activists and others who work directly with affected communities. Grassroots actors have firsthand knowledge of the challenges facing communities and are often the driving force behind peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives. They are well-versed in the local context and are essential to sustainable peacebuilding efforts.



**Figure 4.** Peacebuilding Pyramid Peacebuilding Pyramid  
Source: (Lederach, 1997)

Lederach's pyramid model highlights the importance of engaging actors at all levels of society to address the complexities of conflict and promote sustainable peace effectively. By recognizing the roles and contributions of leaders at every level, peacebuilding activists

can develop more inclusive and comprehensive strategies for conflict transformation. Using this analytical knife will reveal the legitimacy, uniqueness, and roles of actors involved in conflict resolution efforts, whether through top-down or bottom-up approaches. As such, peacebuilding emphasizes the importance of joint work, reconciliation, justice, social and structural transformation, and inclusive community development as integral parts of creating a solid and sustainable peace. This approach emphasizes that peace is not simply the result of stopping fighting but a process that involves deep changes in managing conflict.

### **The Role of Religious Leaders as Top Leadership Actors**

The South Sudan Council of Churches, recognized as a neutral body, has the primary responsibility of facilitating dialogue at the community and national levels (Agwanda & Harris, 2009). It acts to fight marginalization, support the liberation struggle, advocate for human rights, and promote unity, equality, and peace among the diverse communities in South Sudan (Bedigen, 2022). Since the start of the civil war in 2013, the SSCC has served as an intermediary between the warring parties and has played an important role in society. The SSCC's role in peacebuilding demonstrates the ability of religion to build peace and influence other key conventional regional structures, such as IGAD and the AU. For example, the IGAD-led peace agreement signed in Addis Ababa in January 2015 ended the worst humanitarian crisis in the region (Bedigen 2017).

In 2016, the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC) encouraged sustainable conflict resolution and developed an

innovative strategy called the Action Plan for Peace (APP). The APP is a church-led roadmap developed in South Sudan toward peace and reconciliation by bringing people together at the community level, including pastors in each region (Bubenzer, 2018). Therefore, the SSCC and bishops have an important role in building peace and reconciliation between the conflicting parties in South Sudan by ensuring that the referendum takes place on time (Times, 2021). Here are some of the roles of the SSCC in peacebuilding in South Sudan: First, it advises and mediates the revitalization of ARCSS in conflicts between warring groups in South Sudan, whether political, ethnic or religious. It helps build trust and confidence between conflicting parties. Secondly, it helps identify the root causes of conflicts which builds approaches to resolve them, as well as encouraging reconciliation of groups involved in conflicts and promoting cooperation and tolerance among them. Bishop Paride Taban contributed to mediation and the resulting ceasefire signaled by the 2018 R-ARCSS (Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan) in Ethiopia, signed by President Salva Kiir and Riek Machar (Berdal & Shearer, 2021; Wild et al., 2019).

Thirdly, the SSCC also supports the process of dialogue peacebuilding, acting as mediators, companions, and witnesses. Fourthly, the SSCC helped open access to education, health, and infrastructure development both directly and indirectly through other church members. Fifth, in the peace negotiation process, church leaders provided spiritual support for the people of South Sudan through Sunday church services and created space for people affected by the conflict to express their trauma and find healing. The church has an important role in promoting reconciliation and addressing some of South Sudan's cultural practices that encourage revengeful attitudes (SSCC, 2022).

## **The Role of Religious Leaders as Middle-Range Leadership**

The SSCC advocates by influencing policies to resolve conflicts peacefully and transform conflict dynamics into peace. It launched a radio broadcast campaign to raise awareness about peace messages despite government restrictions on radio access that could hamper the effectiveness of the religious sector. In addition to delivering peace messages, it also focuses on advocacy towards external actors, including recent efforts in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Zambia, with the aim of ending inter-community violence (Del Vicario, 2022; RA et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the collaboration between SSCC and local actors in the establishment of neutral forums provides a safe space for stakeholders to discuss the root causes of conflict and envision a peaceful future through dialogue that produces positive outcomes for peace. In the absence of neutral forums, the likelihood of success in reducing the level of violence occurring in South Sudan would be slim (SSCC, 2022). Reconciliation aims to restore community relations due to the civil war, with the belief that only through forgiveness and reconciliation can the people of South Sudan live as one nation. The reconciliation was realized through a collaboration between SSCC and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) in organizing gender mainstreaming training in 2021. The training involved youth, International Criminal Court, Women Link, and civil society organizations to provide knowledge and skills in integrating gender mainstreaming principles in development (SSCC, 2022).

SSCC has also facilitated consultation meetings aimed at local government officials, traditional chiefs, youth, teachers, medical personnel, women, and industry representatives to discover solutions and

initiate a peace process to break the cycle of inter-ethnic violence. The meetings were conducted by sharing experiences, grievances, and difficulties related to the forgiveness and reconciliation process. The role of church leaders in mediating and facilitating discussions helped in the process of healing and rebuilding the social fabric shattered by the impact of the conflict experienced by the community. Such efforts proved highly effective in restoring intergroup relations and repairing the social damage caused by the civil war (Kuol, 2014; SSCC, 2022).

Monthly prayer and fasting activities conducted by the people of South Sudan have created a forum for these women to share their experiences, harnessing the spirit of reconciliation and forgiveness among ethnic tribes in the Equatoria region. The faithful also believe that through prayer and fasting, the narrative and context of conflict will transform into an environment of peace where ethnic tribes can co-exist, creating reconciliation, forgiveness, healing, and restoration of healthy relationships. In addition, collectively, and together as women of faith, they called on the SSCC to request government authorities to approve the street prayer vigil (Norwegian Church Aid, 2018).

In this country, there is a joint commitment of all the churches through the SSCC, and there is unity not only between the Protestant churches but the Catholic Church also plays a huge role. Bishop Carlassare revealed that “the conflict in South Sudan is very complicated. From 2013 to 2019, there was a very political conflict, which, of course, had some ethnic causes, but it did not affect our diocese.” Currently, South Sudan has been blessed by a very powerful governor who was placed there after the attack in which I became a victim. He was able to unite the people, to understand that violence and insecurity would not be allowed to flourish. As one of the leaders of the Catholic Church

in the country, Pope Francis sent a message to the people of South Sudan in which, Bishop Carlassare revealed that “I will say, first of all, never lose hope. Never lose hope because God is there. Moreover, we are not alone. We are not locked up in our country with our problems. Where there is a will, there is a way, and there is a way when we can bind ourselves together” (Tulloch, 2023).

### The Role of Religious Leaders as Grassroots Leadership

Religious leaders have an important role in providing legitimacy and influence in South Sudanese society. The majority of South Sudanese, including the non-religious, are more likely to seek guidance from religious leaders when they face problems or difficulties. It demonstrates that people see religious leaders as an important source of spiritual guidance and leadership. Thus, the statement emphasizes how significant the role of religious leaders is in providing direction and moral leadership to the people of South Sudan. Based on people’s perceptions, the Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church are the most influential and important religious institutions in peace efforts in South Sudan (Wilson, 2019). Some bishops have played an important role in peace efforts in South Sudan, both in high-level peace processes and at the local level. They have strong legitimacy, which may be based on their influence in society and their participation in important peace initiatives as follows:

**Tabel 1.** The Role of Bishops of South Sudan

No	Name of Bishop	Origin	Role
1	Paulino Lokudu Loro	Roman Catholic Juba	Assisting in the release of prisoners, preaching messages of love, unity, and reconciliation
2	Paride Taban	Church Leader	Mediating and producing a ceasefire and peace agreement between the rebels
3	Daniel Deng Bul	Episcopal Church of South Sudan and Sudan	Working with other religious leaders to invite Salva Kiir and Riek Machar to a joint prayer in 2014 and providing peace messages to rural communities
4	Edward Hiiboro Kussala	Catholic in Yambio	Organizing a peace conference attended by two rebel groups, the government and mediated disputes at the local level
5	Enoch Tombe	The Episcopal Bishop of the Rajaf Diocese	Faith-based community team leaders in peace talks ahead of ARCSS 2015 and RARCSS 2018 to end the war

Source: (Wilson, 2019)

These Bishops have contributed to high-level peace processes and hold significant positions at the local level. Research and other sources help explain the sources of their legitimacy. Moreover, religious women and religious youth also play an important role in peace efforts. The role of religious women is not only to mediate domestic disputes but also to play a supporting role in their institutions, such as providing advice to

congregants, especially young women, on how to carry out religious practices and reinforcing religious values. In addition, religious women also serve vulnerable groups through counseling activities, providing support for girls' education, services to orphans, and professions as nurses and midwives.

Meanwhile, the role of religious youth plays a critical role and describes them as "pillars of the church," "the backbone of society," and "the future." The role of religious youth includes organizing training on the development of the church. The role of religious youth includes organizing training on peacebuilding, conflict resolution, leadership skills, and agricultural skills. They are also involved in fundraising for church causes and leading sporting events (Norwegian Church Aid, 2018).

In addition, Islamic Muslim leader Juma Said Ali, an advisor to South Sudan's president on Islamic Affairs, is one of the influential Islamic actors. He was mentioned most frequently by respondents, highlighting his role in the peace process in Addis Ababa and his service to the needy. Some respondents also praised peace efforts involving Muslim groups through interfaith institutions, emphasizing that war knows no religion. While there may have been negative sentiments toward Muslims in the past, the majority of respondents see them as friends today (Norwegian Church Aid, 2018). As such, the statement highlights the role of religious leaders in endorsing and reinforcing religious values and providing practical support to their communities, both individually and through religious institutions. It suggests that religious women have a significant impact in promoting social and spiritual well-being within their communities.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This article concluded that through mapping the peacebuilding pyramid model in South Sudan, several religious leadership actors have been involved and had different roles. Firstly, in the top leadership category, religious leaders, such as SSCC and bishops, focused on the ceasefire and high-level mediation that resulted in the signing of the R-ARCSS agreement by the conflicting parties, namely Salva Kiir (Dinka) and Riek Machar (Nuer), in 2018 in Ethiopia. Secondly, in the middle-range leadership category, SSCC advocated and influenced policies through radio broadcasts as well as reconciling between the conflicting

parties and ethnic communities. Third, grassroots actors, including women religious leaders, bishops, Muslims, and youth religious leaders, have organized various social activities such as training on peacebuilding, conflict resolution, leadership skills, and agricultural skills.

This research is a milestone that reveals the involvement of religious leaders in the post-civil war peacebuilding process in South Sudan. However, the analysis of the number and role of these actors is still not optimal, and the authors have not fully explored the level of their participation. Therefore, subsequent analyses are expected to explore more deeply the dynamics of religious leaders' participation in the struggle for peace in South Sudan, especially in changes in the conflict situation after the completion of the transition period. This paper is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the role of leadership actors develops and contributes to strengthening regional stability and peace in South Sudan.

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