Opinion – Resilience and the Preparation of the Liberal Subject

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The discourse surrounding resilience, particularly in postcolonial contexts, reveals a series of tensions and contradictions in its conceptualization and application. A critical examination of engagements with "local" resilience practitioners in South Sudan highlights two problematic aspects inherent in current practices. First, the role of the "local" researcher or practitioner, ostensibly included to provide culturally specific context, often reduces their contributions to peripheral "colour commentary", relegating them to secondary roles in what is framed as the substantive, externally driven work of resilience programming within multilateral and international and local non-governmental organisations. Second, the notion of resilience "implementation" itself exemplifies a paradox: an externally imposed set of interventions designed to cultivate what is presumed to be an inherently internal and self-sustaining quality. This contradictory logic underscores the dissonance between resilience as a conceptual ideal and its operationalisation within international development frameworks, particularly in post-independence settings.

The opportunity to exchange with these experts in South Sudan on resilience – not the ones paid large money to develop resilience programming for the likes of UNDP, USAID and World Bank, but those usually providing the short-term consultancies to apply resilience in a context sensitive way – has been provided by a series of workshops in the course of an AHRC-funded project on 'decolonising resilience', led by Coventry University's Centre for Peace and Security in collaboration with the University of Westminster. In his take on the second of the workshops in this series, in Juba, South Sudan, David Chandler has analysed South Sudan as a country under "resilience governance". According to him, resilience governance can be seen as a state of semi-independence, a form of colonial care enforced by international agencies and their multiplicity of resilience programming.

The concept of resilience, often framed as an inherent quality of individuals and communities, takes on a particularly unruly character in the context of post-independence South Sudan. Resilience is not merely a desirable attribute; it is a necessity for survival. Communities rely on informal resilience mechanisms and structures to navigate the frequent absence of basic resources such as food, water or salaries – a condition vividly exemplified by university staff and civil servants across the country who, at the time of writing, have gone almost a year without pay. However, this form of resilience is marked by its unpredictability and, at times, its dangerous manifestations.

In South Sudan's Lakes State, for instance, children as young as ten form hunting parties to secure food, often operating without any parental supervision. These young individuals exhibit remarkable survival skills, such as killing and butchering warthogs – animals several times their size. Such practices, while essential for survival in this context, are unimaginable for children in more protected environments, such as those in Europe or North America, where similar survival demands are absent, and childhood is structured around markedly different expectations and protections. Similarly, raiding parties have emerged as a facet of youth culture, reflecting a form of resilience that challenges normative developmental frameworks. Yet, these forms of resilience are rendered as problematic from a developmental perspective precisely because they are unregulated and resistant to external control. It can be violent, exclusionary, and oppositional, frequently targeting others in ways that defy the "orderly" resilience envisioned by development actors.

A different conceptualisation of resilience emerges within the frameworks of development agencies – resilience as a

developmental bridge. Resilience is embedded within the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus, where it occupies a pivotal role in developmental discourse. Within this paradigm, resilience is primarily situated within the "P" – peacebuilding – element but functions even more significantly as a preparatory foundation for the "D" of development. For development practitioners, resilience hence serves a dual purpose: it is inherently backward-looking, aiming to prevent relapses into conflict or crisis, while simultaneously forward-looking, preparing the groundwork for sustainable developmental progress. This instrumentalised resilience is thus framed as a transitional mechanism, bridging the humanitarian need to stabilise fragile contexts with the aspirational goals of long-term development.

Within the developmental paradigm, resilience is framed as a necessary precursor to development; individuals and communities must first become resilient before they can be considered capable of achieving "sustainable development". This approach reflects a rediscovery by external actors of resilience as an existing quality within communities – particularly in contexts deemed fragile or conflict-affected. However, this inherent resilience is often perceived as requiring systemic transformation. Raw and unregulated forms of resilience, such as those manifesting through violence, must be reoriented into resilience against violence to align with the goals of development programming. This transition represents a normative reframing of resilience, where its "raw" elements are reshaped to fit the orderly, non-threatening constructs favoured by international development agencies.

This approach can be exemplified by the terms of reference of the UN-led Reconciliation, Stabilization and Resilience Multi-Donor Trust Fund (RSRTF) in South Sudan, where, under its resilience pillar, "the Fund aims to invest in community capacities and resources to promote equality, agency and self-reliance to ultimately reduce vulnerability to future shocks and stresses. The resilience activities are not standalone initiatives. They are linked to identified conflict drivers at sub-national and national levels and empower communities in conflict hotspots to reap tangible socioeconomic peace dividends."

Development programming often seeks to empower communities by redirecting them away from practices associated with violence and ancient practices, replacing existing resilience capacities with forms that align with liberal modalities. This process involves fostering a specific type of resilience – one that emphasises access to markets, justice, or education, thereby cultivating liberal subjects prepared to engage with developmental frameworks. In this reconfiguration, resilience is not merely about survival but about rendering individuals and communities "developmental", reshaped into entities deemed suitable for engagement by development actors and systems. The ultimate goal is to produce subjects capable of participating in and benefiting from the broader liberal development agenda. Hence, resilience – as it has developed in this new form – has not become a replacement of the idea of development, sustainability and direct engagement as it has been assessed by a number of scholars a while back, but instead has turned into a colonising bridge for not yet liberal subjects to become developmentable.

A compelling example of the tensions in resilience and peacebuilding programming can be found in peacebuilding workshops conducted among the Murle in South Sudan's Greater Pibor region, as observed by one of the authors. Participants are placed in parallel worlds: on one hand, embedded in their traditional structures of age sets and community practices, which can often take violent forms; on the other hand, they are engaged as consumers of externally driven peacebuilding workshops aimed at transforming them into peace champions or peace activists. This duality reflects a disconnect between local realities and the assumptions underpinning international interventions.

A high-ranking UN official from the UK, reflecting on this dynamic, noted that in case of organised youth violence in the UK, there is hardly any peacebuilding training. "We send the police and put them into prison", as he noted. This stark contrast raises a critical question: why is there such a divergence in approaches? Does it stem from an implicit assumption that communities like the Murle are "unripe" and must first be prepared for liberal forms of governance and treatment? This differential treatment underscores the underlying paternalism in these interventions, framing certain populations as needing transformation before they can be integrated into the liberal order.

Resilience, in this context, functions as a preparatory mechanism for the formation of the liberal subject. Communities and individuals are not regarded as being at a stage where they can engage fully with the liberal framework of governance, rights, and responsibilities. The same perception extends to the South Sudanese state

itself, which is often treated as an entity in need of transformation before it can align with liberal norms. This dynamic fosters a neurotic relationship between international donors and the South Sudanese context, characterised by a mix of dependency, frustration, and control. Resilience programming, within this framework, is less about addressing immediate needs and more about preparing the ground for the eventual integration of individuals, communities, and the state into the liberal developmental order. It represents an intermediary step in a broader project of liberal transformation.

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