





Front cover photograph: Detail of the tobe made by Sudanese Women as part of Waging Peace's 'Piece for Peace' project (Credit: Charlotte Martin).

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The ACROSS Story and Journey: Beyond 50 Years

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Introduction

The journey of ACROSS from the time of its founding over 50 years ago to the present time is a story of joy, pain, struggle, challenges and opportunities, but more importantly, it is about the love of God through dedicated individuals who availed themselves to be His hands, feet, eyes, and heart for His people.

The call for ACROSS came about as a result of the passion of a few missionaries and a request from local leaders (Southern elites and church leaders) who wanted to start rebuilding, reconstruction and rehabilitation of livelihoods at the end of the first civil war in 1972. From then on, ACROSS has continued to serve the people of South Sudan (including currently in northern Uganda, and a small presence in Kenya), becoming one of the oldest organisations in the country.

ACROSS's Ministry now reaches out to more than half of the ten States of the Republic of South Sudan and operates in some of the most difficult and needy areas in the country. Its ministry remains a pursuit to holistically transform communities.

Amidst the current challenges and contextual issues in the country, such as the upcoming elections in December 2024, nation-state fragility, declining socio-economic conditions, and the shaky peace and security situation, communities and citizens are often victims and the most neglected groups continue to struggle for survival. ACROSS is a true partner alongside them, seeking and striving for their transformation and comfort.

This article narrates ACROSS's story and journey from its founding to date, outlining the different stages and the metamorphoses it has undergone, while remaining unwavering in its founding principles and values, its mission and calling.

Background and Context

The first civil war and lengthy instability that lasted from 1955 to 1972 devastated the southern region of Sudan. Homes were demolished, hospitals and schools damaged, infrastructure (roads and bridges) damaged and lives and livelihoods lost and destroyed. Many people were at the mercy of malnutrition and sickness and those who were displaced often had no home to go back to when the fighting ceased.

When the peace was signed in 1972 (the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement)

those who had fled into the southern bush and neighbouring countries began to return home and Sudan began experiencing a period of relative quiet. Hence, it was imperative that the Church took action to ensure rehabilitation and reconstruction for both internally displaced people and those who were coming back from refugee camps in neighbouring countries so that they could resettle in their communities.

The Genesis of ACROSS

The Committee for the Rehabilitation of Southern Sudan (CROSS) was established in 1972 after discussions between Dr Ken Tracey, a dental surgeon and public health administrator with Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), Geoff Dearsley, field superintendent of Sudan United Mission (SUM), and two other mission societies, Africa Inland Mission (AIM) and Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF). Meeting first in Jos, Nigeria, these missionaries wanted CROSS to address three main issues in the short term i.e. food, health, education and shelter for Sudanese returnees and their rehabilitation back to their villages.¹

The 'Africa Committee for the Rehabilitation of Southern Sudan' (ACROSS) replaced the original name, CROSS, shortly after its formation and an Advisory Committee was established, with its headquarters and Executive Director, Dr Ken Tracey in Nairobi, Kenya, and the Assistant Director, Pastor Darrel Welling in Khartoum. The Committee initially aimed to function for a year but this was extended to two years in 1974. ACROSS's administrative body included Nairobi office staff, nurses, a pilot (MAF), labourers, and teachers. A global fundraising campaign was launched, with support from various organisations. A health base was established in Juba by 1972, and ACROSS was officially registered in Kenya by 1975; its continuity was endorsed on the sidelines at the first Lausanne Congress in 1974, Switzerland.

<u>Health</u>

In 1973, ACROSS established two centres in Akot and a third in Rumbek, employing 36 foreign workers from various countries. A dispensary was established in Mvolo to advance studies in river blindness. ACROSS did not follow its original plan of discontinuing operations in 1974 and continued its work

¹ Keith Black, "45 Years History of ACROSS," paper presented at the ACROSS 25-Year Anniversary Celebration in Limuru, Kenya, 2012 (unpublished).

² ACROSS was endorsed by the: World Relief Commission (WRC), Medical Assistant Program (MAP), Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), World Vision International (WVI), and TEAR Fund among others.

³ Michael Wall, "Understanding the Values of Christian Organisations: A Case Study of Across (1972-2005) using the Organisational Culture Theory of Edgar Schein." PhD. Diss., Middlesex University, United Kingdom, 2014).

with significant sponsorship from Christian organisations. Its programmes focused on relief and rehabilitation in health, building, blacksmithing, and tailoring.

Between 1976 and 1982, ACROSS constructed and managed over 15 health facilities, in different parts of Western Equatoria, Bahr El Ghazal and Jonglei provinces.

Education

The ACROSS team in Sudan strengthened the education sector by assigning fifteen teachers and instructors to five secondary schools and teacher training institutes in 1977-79, i.e. Rumbek, Loka and Juba Girls' Secondary Schools and Maridi Teacher Training Institute. They focused on literacy and textbook preparation. In 1977, a Board of Governors, parents and government and church leaders, founded the Juba Model School, housing 10 to 15 students in two rooms in the grounds of the Episcopal Church of the Sudan (ECS). The school had 250 students by 1979; the Kuwait government constructed a new school at a new location in 1980.

Agriculture and community development

In 1977, ACROSS agriculturalists began expanding their operations in West Equatoria, planting nursery beds for various crops including pawpaw, guava, bananas, pineapples, and citrus. They also experimented with onions and coffee. They gave out 1,800 budded citrus trees in 1979, and more than 3,000 in the 1980s. By 1981, 2,000 citrus trees had been planted in Mundri and mangoes were added. To promote large-scale agriculture, oxen ploughing was tested. In Mundri and Boma, ACROSS brought in poultry, and subsequently rabbits.

Communication - Roads and Bridges

In 1981, 300km of newly rehabilitated roads in the Mundri area were opened to facilitate travel between states, *payams*, and *bomas*, enabling ACROSS to coordinate its operations. In 1982, Mundri district had five agricultural centres and forty-four agents.

Sudan Literature Centre

In 1988, Rhys Hall's⁴ vision of setting up a publishing house in Nairobi was realised with the founding of the Sudan Literature Centre. The centre produced Christian literature, hymn books, catechisms, and readers for churches,

⁴ Rhys Hall was/is one of the long-serving ACROSS staff (missionary). He is from Australia, and was sent/seconded to ACROSS by what used to be called Sudan United Mission (SUM) and is now Pioneer International. He returned to Australia with his wife Rhondda in 2021 after over 40 years with ACROSS in Yei, Nairobi and Arua.

in addition to hundreds of thousands of textbooks for Southern Sudanese schools. The school textbooks department was eventually handed over to the Secretariat of Education for the New Sudan government (SPLM), in 2003.

Water Development

Southern Sudan faces water issues as much of the area is semi-arid and reliant on seasonal rains. ACROSS drilled 37 boreholes before 1979 and 146 by 1980. However, demand exceeded supply, and maintenance was challenging. In 1982, six wells were drilled at Boma, two of which had windmills. Locals excavated wells, built dams, and protected springs for piped water, and by 1983, water-filters were developed.

Construction

In 1979, construction began by ACROSS on ECS property in Juba and church offices, medical assistant housing, dispensaries, and primary health care facilities were built. The Bible Society also constructed new offices and housing. ACROSS opened its office complex in 1983 and expanded its programmes in the 1970s and 1980s, attracting local communities with its distinctive work model. Workers travelled from far away to live among locals and provide the necessary tools for self-reliance. The ACROSS Board emphasised the importance of enhancing local capacity and incorporating the training of Sudanese nationals into all its programmes.

Church related programs

In 1973, government officials approached ACROSS informally to ask them to reopen missions under the ACROSS name, but these requests were not immediately fulfilled. However, ACROSS began sending employees, mainly from the Church Mission Society (CMS) to the local churches and erecting its homes on church property. The Southern Regional Government supported ACROSS's decision in 1979 to increase its involvement in church planting, evangelism, and allied ministries with the national Churches. The Church was encouraged to evangelise alongside ACROSS.

<u>Ugandan refugees</u>

Ugandan refugees began to enter Sudan in 1979, with over 160,000 fleeing there by the mid-1980s. In 1982 in the Yei River District, ACROSS signed a tripartite agreement with the UNHCR and Sudanese Government to build, develop, and provide housing for the refugees. In 1983, ACROSS established four additional settlements in Yei River and Maridi districts, serving a total of 36,000 Ugandans. By 1985, there were 16 settlements and 60,000 refugees under ACROSS care, with Ugandans and Southern Sudanese coexisting amicably.

ACROSS and its work in northern Sudan

The Sudanese Church of Christ, led by Pastor Samwiil Jangul Angollo, was co-opted onto the ACROSS Board in 1977, marking the beginning of a relationship with the North. Angollo, who was raised in the Abri region of the Nuba Mountains, played a significant role in introducing the Leprosy Control Program into that region. Under Rev. Roy Conwell, SUM created an effective program for treating leprosy patients. In 1972, Conwell, Dr David Carling and Bitrus the General Secretary of the Church of Christ in Nigeria, visited the Nuba Mountains and were told that while the Sudanese government was concerned about leprosy patients, only African workers were welcome to work there and white missionaries were not. The Church of Christ's subsequent work in leprosy control in the Nuba Mountains was led by Nigerians Joseph Iro and Solomon Inah who began their work in 1976 and were later joined by their families.

By 1980, ACROSS's hopes of growing in northern Sudan faded. They faced uncertainty because of the frequent turnover of Commissioners and changes in government administration. However, ACROSS was committed to northern Sudan and sought ways to expand its ministry. The ACROSS Executive decided in March 1981 to open an office in Khartoum and the arrival of Andy and Mary Willis of SUM as ACROSS's northern representatives in 1984, made this decision a reality. However, this achievement was short-lived as President Nimeiri of Sudan implemented *sharia* law in the northern regions in 1983 and missionaries became unwelcome.

Despite its inability to re-establish itself in the north, ACROSS has been able to assist the churches there in a variety of ways. Following Sudan's split into Sudan and South Sudan in July 2011, the Sudanese Church of Christ established a branch in Juba and in a number of other areas, enabling it to take advantage of ACROSS programs. Help from ACROSS has made its way to the north, particularly the Nuba Mountains, and it is much appreciated there.

The outbreak of the second civil war and the deteriorating security situation

The Boma incident

In June 1983, the ACROSS compound in Boma that housed a family of two adults and two children, was taken over by the newly formed Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). They looted a police station and a wildlife camp and captured one British and one German national. The rebels seized two planes, three children, and eight adults. The captured personnel were rescued in July 1983 after an arduous ordeal. Following this event, ACROSS withdrew its staff from Jonglei Province and the growing turmoil

in Bahr al Ghazel led to the termination of integrated community activities in that region.

Islamic laws declared by Nimeiri in September 1983

Despite strong opposition, the Sudanese government declared an Islamic state and drafted a new constitution, sparking protests in the South and prompting the emergence of the SPLA/M. The churches objected, when posters stating "After today, no more Christianity" were hung outside Khartoum's central mosque. While Islam was being enforced in Sudan, missions, particularly SUM, attempted to obtain authorisation to operate in Darfur, but were unsuccessful. In November 1984, ACROSS received an invitation to carry out a UNHCR Relief operation in Western Darfur Province, centred on the market town of Foro Boranga which borders Chad. ACROSS entered into a tripartite agreement with the government and UNHCR and constructed a welcome centre at Anji Koti, providing food, water, shelter, medical attention, immunisations, and treatment for malnourished children; they also built communal latrines.

ACROSS was authorised to operate in Darfur and Khartoum but its licence was terminated in March 1986 and they were asked to leave Anji Koti within 15 days without explanation, by the Sudanese Government's Commissioner for Refugees. In April, ACROSS removed 10 employees from Anji Koti and 32 non-Sudanese employees from Nyala. ACROSS was accused of propagating Christianity, discriminating against Muslims, and assisting the SPLA, as well as involvement in rebel activities. In April 1986, the government's 'Technical Committee for Control of Foreign Agencies' investigated ACROSS's assertion that they had been falsely accused. Despite being cleared, ACROSS continued to evacuate its employees from Anji Koti, while new potential workplaces were investigated, particularly Shendi. The United Nations (UN) recognised ACROSS's efforts for Ugandan refugees as among the best, but by mid-1986, most Ugandans were self-sufficient, and ACROSS's assistance ceased.

The intensification of unrest in Southern Sudan

In 1985, ACROSS began providing emergency aid to displaced people affected by the war in Southern Sudan. They collaborated with the Combined Agencies Relief Team (CART) to help 50,000 people, primarily in Mundri, building two camps outside the town at Miri Molo and Mvolo. However, instability made it difficult to continue operations. In 1986, ACROSS lost two drivers (a Sudanese and a Ugandan) in an SPLA attack, resulting in them deciding to focus their work in Juba, Yei and Maridi in 1987. The organisation faced challenges in removing their workers and ensuring continued operations.

SPLA activities persisted and affected the whole Southern region, and in July 1987, three ACROSS employees and one Christian Mission Aid (CMA)

employee were kidnapped. ACROSS evacuated the rest of its staff to Maridi. Four of the kidnapped people were released after seven weeks in detention and were taken to the eastern bank of the Nile and eventually flown to Nairobi. By the end of 1987, the SPLA had established a stronghold in Western Equatoria, making movement difficult and mostly limited to military convoys. ACROSS made efforts to maintain personnel in Yei and Maridi but layoffs were made at its Nairobi headquarters and its team in Sudan was reduced to 27.

ACROSS's expulsion from Sudan

In a repeat of what happened in 1964 (The 1961 Missionaries Act expelling all missionaries in Sudan),⁵ the government in Khartoum sent a telegram on 17th September 1987, giving ACROSS, World Vision International, Lutheran World Aid, and the Swedish Free Mission three weeks to leave Sudan. "Their operations threatened national security," a news announcement said. The expulsion letter stated that development was the current necessity, and that no further relief aid was needed.

The background to the expulsion order was the publication of an article by the *El Rayah* newspaper in Khartoum in 1987, in which it was claimed that ACROSS was an umbrella for missionary activity, with no Sudanese in executive roles. The newspaper alleged that the organisation avoided using qualified Sudanese and hired returned American soldiers, citing the case of Col. George Meyers, who had a master's degree in agriculture (he was approved by Sudan Govt. and so were all other ACROSS staff). The name changes of the organisation that had taken place over the years i.e. from "Africa Committee for the Rehabilitation of Southern Sudan" to "ACROSS" in 1972, and "Association of Christian Resource Organisations Serving Sudan" in 1986, were seen as evidence of "tricks and suspicious practices."

The ACROSS Board resolved in November 1987 that it would shut down and leave Sudan entirely. ACROSS was granted permission to investigate working in Somalia and Chad, but when the Sudanese government rejected their plea to continue their work in Sudan on 15th February, 1988, ACROSS donated her assets to the churches and government; by 15th April, 1988, ACROSS had completed its evacuation from Sudan.

Operations in the SPLM/A liberated areas

In March 1988, the Board held an extraordinary meeting in the UK to discuss the dissolution of ACROSS in Sudan. Church leaders in Sudan proposed

⁵ Roland Werner, William Anderson and Andrew Wheeler, *Days of Devastation Days of Contentment: The History of the Sudanese Church across 2000 Years* (Nairobi: Paulines Press, 2000) pp.385-403.

ways to continue ACROSS's work and after a day of discussion, the board decided to continue. In the following few months eleven new projects, all but one related to churches, were approved, including evangelism assistance, emergency relief in North and South Sudan, assisting churches in ongoing ACROSS initiatives, service ministry to Sudanese churches, emergency relief to 350,000 Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia, and the establishment of a Sudan Literature Centre.

In November 1988 the ACROSS Board decided to launch an integrated programme in areas controlled' by the SPLA (80% of Southern Sudan), including work in agriculture, livestock, education, health, and water development. The agreement was with the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA), and ACROSS would function under Operation Lifeline Sudan, a UN initiative. This decision led to the CMS and World Vision International withdrawing from ACROSS, SIM becoming hesitant about working with them and MAF expressing concern about the responses of some African governments to this decision in the countries where they worked. Later on these agencies came back to Sudan.

In 1989, a pilot project began in Boma with two small Kachepo congregations. However, the program was suspended in 1990 and in November 1990, the ACROSS Board decided to focus on Sudanese initiatives in collaboration with the national Church, rather than attempting to enter the South to fulfil its own projects. This decision led to immediate invitations from churches in need of funding, staff, management assistance, and coordination.

A medical program was established in Akobo in 1991, focusing on training medical workers and curative care. ACROSS joined UNICEF's education coordination committee in 1994 and used UN aircraft to enter and exit areas. However, in 1992, insecurity led to restrictions on flights to Western Equatoria, forcing ACROSS to establish Kaddam Air for food delivery. Three weeks of aircraft restrictions subsequently led to the deaths of thousands of people dependent on UN food shipments, resulting in further misery.

The extension of ACROSS into the region

ACROSS established an office in Kampala in 1992, to support projects in Western Equatoria. By May 1993 87,000 Sudanese refugees had arrived in Adjumani, Uganda. ACROSS established a base in Arua and sent food, clothing, tools, and seeds to various areas. After the Sudanese Army captured Kaya in 1993, over 100,000 Sudanese fled to Uganda, leading to the establishment of the Ikafe refugee settlement in northern Uganda. ACROSS continued to send supplies to Sudan, despite some bumps along the way. The organisation kept growing as the missions and funders who had left the South started to

return, including the Reformed Mission League (Netherlands), and Tear Fund (UK). The Presbyterian Church of USA re-joined in 1993, enhancing ties with the Sudanese Church; it has continued partnering ACROSS to-date, mainly in girls' education and early childhood education in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area.

Financial struggles

ACROSS faced financial challenges in mid-1994 amidst the planned departure of its Executive Director, Head of Projects, and Finance.

This financial crisis led to drastic action with accounts closing, frozen funds, staff cuts, and the cancellation of UN settlement programs in Uganda. However, with the support of faithful donors, ACROSS was able to recover from the brink of disaster. In November 1994, the Board decided to focus on operational leadership, increased Board involvement, and relations with church leaders. They also proposed expanding spiritual ministries, such as theological training, and setting up an independent evaluation of ACROSS.

The evaluation of ACROSS highlighted its identity and strengths with the aim of establishing a strong organisation. Two committees were established to review statements and consider structural re-organisation.

A similar scenario recurred in 2012-2014 when ACROSS was on the verge of collapse due to a financial crisis but after much prayer and effort from the Board, changes and reforms were made and by 2015, the organisation commenced a path to recovery and to where it is today.

ACROSS Today

ACROSS has been devoted to holistic, Christ-centred development for South Sudan and beyond for the past 52 years. Despite many obstacles, the organisation has persevered to make sure that services reach the people most in need. It offers a platform for individuals, mission partners and institutions worldwide to serve God, and experience personal, professional and ministry growth as they reach out to serve in many parts of South Sudan and beyond in Kenya and Uganda (mainly in the refugee camps in the West Nile region).

Utilising a holistic approach and fostering equal dialogue with a focus on the whole person and individuals, today ACROSS strives to empower communities, enhance education and healthcare, strengthen churches, improve livelihoods, advocate for water sanitation and hygiene, and promote the concept of human dignity. ACROSS operates through collaborative efforts with the global church, various organisations, and the communities it supports. Our headquarters are in Juba, South Sudan, with a liaison office in Nairobi, Kenya. ACROSS boasts a workforce of over 250 dedicated staff members.

Refugee, Relief and Re-integration Programme

ACROSS partners with a range of organisations, including the UNHCR, in refugee settlement management, rehabilitation, protection, and re-integration efforts. This involves receiving returnees, conducting basic health assessments, facilitating transportation to temporary shelters, and distributing essential food and non-food items. The re-integration process is designed to empower refugees to realise and expand their capabilities, protect their human rights, prevent marginalisation and promote social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

Education and Teacher Training

Despite the challenges faced by displaced refugees, they have repeatedly demonstrated that investing in their future can lead to transformative outcomes. Quality education plays a crucial role in empowering refugees to become self-sufficient and prepare for a brighter tomorrow.

With funding from UNICEF, ACROSS has enhanced the skills of Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), mentors, tutors, and educators in the Greater Pibor Administrative Area, Ruweng Administrative Area, and Jonglei. Giving training materials to participating and volunteer teachers, together with centre



Internally Displaced People from Mundri East, Western Equatoria, June 2024. (Credit for all photos: ACROSS).



Gender Based Violence awareness training for Sudanese refugees in Goram, May 2024.

and school-based initiatives, is part of a 'triangle' strategy aimed at strengthening educators' capacity to serve as mentors. Over the last four years, ACROSS has trained over 100 educators/tutors, 3000 volunteer instructors, 2000 teachers and 500 PTAs.

Livelihoods, health, and nutrition

ACROSS has improved the health and standard of living for the most vulner-



Panbarkou girls' primary school, Lakes, April 2024.

able in Lake State and Eastern Equatoria with projects including construction of water yards, growing food crops, providing ox ploughs, and introducing drought-resistant techniques like *Zai* pits⁶ in Kapoeta East. The creation of Village Savings Loan Associations which are self-capitalised, self-managed savings groups that lend money to one another using member funds, has also been encouraged by ACROSS. Through the provision of tailored programs for women's economic growth, food security, and peacebuilding, ACROSS has assisted over 2000 households in escaping poverty. Thanks to the water yards communities now have improved access to safe drinking water and fresh vegetables for marketing and consumption.

In order to better the lives of refugees in the Bidibidi settlement in Uganda, ACROSS has taken the lead in a variety of initiatives. One of its primary goals is trauma healing; the body, mind, and spirit must come first. For someone to successfully adjust and regain their sense of security and stability, they must be



Water Yard for vegetable production, Abinajok, Lakes, April 2024

⁶ This is a technique where crops are planted in small pits and these gather and prolong moisture preservation, especially in semi-arid areas.



Abinajok vegetable garden, Lakes, April 2024.

psychologically stable. ACROSS assists refugees in regaining a sense of security, forging deeper bonds with others, taking better care of their bodies, and increasing their self-assurance through its 'New Hope' trauma rehabilitation project. The healing of trauma has altered people's lives. 'New Hope' trauma healing provided comfort to a young woman who had suffered greatly. She currently works actively as a trauma healer and peacebuilder, helping families in need of consolation, to find joy, hope, and peace. She said, "I am incredibly thankful to God for ACROSS. I'm glad to see families these days maintaining healthy relationships".

Networking and Advocacy

ACROSS collaborates with partners to promote shared concerns that impact the community, and is a member of the South Sudan NGO Forum, as well as belonging to the global CHS Alliance, Micah Network and the Association of Evangelicals in Africa.

It relies heavily on networking and advocacy because improving the lives of the vulnerable population – refugees, children, widows, and people with

disabilities – requires a multimodal, integrated approach to challenging the institutions, norms, policies, and practices that support inequality.

Looking Ahead

In line with the 'Strategic Plan 2022-26', and reflecting on the founding principles of ACROSS and our calling, it is prudent to reflect on the future of ACROSS as we approach our diamond jubilee. We have three propositions in addition to contemplation and prayer:

- Firstly, to strive as an organisation, to be progressive, holistically intentional and transformative; growing into a trustworthy, accountable and 'best practice' institution not just for show or to impress partners and meet donor requirements, but because of who we are; a Christian organisation which seeks to walk its talk.
- Secondly, invest in partnership for 'holistic transformation' at all levels
 of leadership (Church and marketplace), emerging leadership, and the
 community. This will involve engaging in strategic and meaningful partnerships with like-minded institutions, and include capacity building
 and mentorship, among other things.
- Thirdly, to promote sustainability and continuity that are internally born and driven (mission-led or driven), free from external factors, influences and bottlenecks, for both material and spiritual viability and endurance yet conscious and mindful of the context and complexities of the places where we operate.

Conclusion

ACROSS turns 52 in August 2024, which is another milestone in its history; a journey and story with vivid testaments of God's grace and love for the people of the Sudan and South Sudan and beyond. Despite numerous challenges, including staff losing lives (Capt. Greg Bowman and Joseph Kiri) and others being injured, people are still impacted by our work and communities are transformed.

I conclude this article by restating that ACROSS was founded for times such as this and will continue to do its work. After more than 50 years, this is yet another phase where great things lie ahead. Challenges will never cease, some may be seemingly overwhelming, but with God, all things are possible.

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building organisations, as well as lecturing in the University of Juba (Genetics and Animal Breeding). Dr Daniel holds a PhD from the Oxford Centre for Mission studies /Middlesex University, in 'Governance, State-building, Anti-Corruption and Ethics'.

