

Livelihoods and conflict in South Sudan

Key messages

- Livelihoods were in a precarious state in South Sudan even before the outbreak of the current armed conflict in December 2013. The assumption was that conflict had been the factor driving vulnerability, and that after the civil war recovery would take off. But this recovery largely did not occur, especially in Jonglei, where localized conflict continued.
- Localized conflict was driven more by politics, control of livestock, and cycles of retribution than competition over land and water resources. The limited attempts to link livelihoods to peace-building were based on an incomplete analysis.
- Future livelihood reconstruction should be based on much more localised and deeper analysis of conflict, inter-communal grievances and inter-communal relations.

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Background

The SLRC South Sudan programme has been working since 2012 to identify and understand the realities of livelihoods, access to basic services, and perceptions of governance in post-independence South Sudan. In 2013, SLRC conducted research in Uror, Nyirol, and Pibor counties to examine the dynamics of service delivery, state-building and livelihood changes in the context of armed conflict and raiding. Following the outbreak of large-scale armed conflict in December 2013, the research was adjusted to reflect the shift in aid focus to humanitarian action.

This briefing paper summarises findings from the publications of SLRC South Sudan over the life of the programme, all of which can be found at: www.securelivelihoods.org/South-Sudan.

Livelihoods under stress

Many of the attempts to support livelihood recovery and build resilience in South Sudan in the period following Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 were based on two implicit assumptions: first, that the end of the civil war and redirection of resources into state institutions would bring about a 'peace dividend' that would boost livelihoods; and second, that constrained livelihoods, or constrained access to livelihood resources – particularly dry-season grazing and access to water – had been and would continue to be a driver of conflict and insecurity. Many of the

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Livestock - IDP site in Mingkaman

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policies and programmes pursued by aid actors incorporated these two assumptions. Both were, to some degree, mistaken.

Even before the resumption of widespread armed conflict in Greater Upper Nile in 2013, livelihoods were severely constrained, with only very limited recovery in the post-CPA period throughout much of South Sudan, but particularly in Jonglei and Upper Nile State. Despite reliance on a cattle-based pastoral livelihood system, over half the households surveyed in Jonglei and Upper Nile in 2012 had no cattle, and 40% had no livestock at all. Progress on animal health made during the Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) period (1989-2005) had reversed, as community-based animal health worker networks collapsed from lack of sustained support and livestock diseases increased. Areas under cultivation were declining, yields were low, and livelihood support services were very limited. Qualitative research in 2013 that complemented the 2012 survey found crisis levels of livelihood insecurity, driven in part by serious violence and local conflict pre-dating the late 2013 outbreak of wider conflict.

There had been a long history of livelihood support to civilian populations in areas under the control of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) throughout the OLS period. Following the CPA, there was a major effort to support the return and resettlement of refugees and those internally displaced. Although recovery was the watchword, SLRC research found that livelihoods in Jonglei appeared to be, in many cases, under greater stress in the period after South Sudan's independence in 2011 than before. OLS initiatives ended after the CPA, as it was assumed by many aid agencies that the conflict had been the main impediment to livelihoods, though some observers pointed to evidence to the contrary.

Despite the status of livelihoods and food security, in many areas external actors' major emphasis was not on livelihood recovery but instead on state-building and development at a very different level. Farming and livestock-keeping were facing severe constraints, yet few alternatives and little support were available. Nearly a quarter of the households surveyed in Jonglei and Upper Nile in 2012, particularly those displaced by localised violence and raiding, reported coping strategies based almost exclusively on natural resource extraction. Services provided by the state were very limited. Even international support for livelihood services at the local level was inadequate and in some cases actually declined in the post-CPA period. Very limited assistance (if any) was available to those who had lost cattle and other livestock.

People relied heavily on kinship networks to maintain livelihoods during armed conflict and crisis. But when crisis affects large swaths of the community, these networks are overburdened and unable to be as supportive (among other problems). People in Jonglei fleeing violent conflict or raiding relied heavily on support, including shelter, from kin in non-affected areas. This included Juba in the case of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Pibor County, or areas in Lakes State in the case of IDPs fleeing fighting in Bor and surrounding areas in early 2014. However, these host communities were also subject to the same kind of livelihood constraints (even if they had not been displaced), and IDPs who were forced to rely solely on kinship supports were among the most vulnerable groups noted in SLRC research. That said, in places such as Mingkaman, one of the largest settlements of IDPs in the country in 2014, both the IDPs and the host communities were benefitting from a major international relief effort, although as people from Jonglei moved cattle across the Nile to Lakes State, competition over grazing and water inevitably increased.

Understanding the context of livelihoods in armed conflict

In many areas – particularly but not exclusively Jonglei – armed conflict didn't end despite the CPA and independence. Security remained the major constraint to livelihoods. Cattle-raiding was the primary reason given for the decline in livestock ownership. Raiding – and political rebellion framed as raiding, such as that of David Yau Yau's forces – was rampant in 2012-2013, particularly in Jonglei but elsewhere too. This underlined the observation that, although labelled 'post-conflict', many parts of South Sudan – and Jonglei in particular – were still very much mired in armed conflict, albeit of a more localised nature than during the civil war.

'Traditional' raiding has been transformed into an activity with additional commercial and political elements. Armed conflict was not ignored as a driver of livelihood vulnerability, but in many cases the links between livelihoods and conflict were misunderstood by external actors: in Jonglei, conflict was less directly about control over livelihood resources such as dry-season grazing lands and access to water than it was about the ownership of cattle – and the links of cattle to many other aspects of culture, marriage, age sets¹, and masculinity – but also about power and ethnic competition driven in many cases by cycles of revenge. In Jonglei, insecurity was the cause of poor livelihood outcomes, not the other way around, as is sometimes assumed. SLRC research noted that raiding between, for example, the Murle and the Lou Nuer in Jonglei took a different shape in each group, and had much to do with cultural narratives about one another, which were closely intertwined with perceptions of their own and other groups' political power (or lack thereof) at the state and national levels. These social dynamics were frequently overlooked as drivers of conflict, though they almost certainly played into armed conflict at the local level, and to some degree even at the national level.

Raiding had become more violent in the post-CPA period; respondents explained that attacks were organised to also avenge losses of human life – including the alleged abduction of children by raiders on both sides – as well as property. Unlike earlier eras, livestock were sometimes killed rather than stolen during raids. Raiding had displaced many people – entire communities, in some cases – or forced other changes on seasonal migration and livelihood patterns, such as women and children moving to the cattle camp in hopes of improved security, where normally they would have remained behind to cultivate. However, armed conflict was not the only driver of livelihood vulnerability. Other hazards such as seasonal flooding, the rapid – and in many cases, spontaneous or unplanned – return of refugees and the internally displaced, and in more recent times, economic shocks have also put severe stress on livelihood systems in some communities, and thus exacerbated vulnerability and insecurity. Among the

1 Age sets are a key social category for some ethnic groups, creating a shared identity among people of similar age within the larger group.

displaced, exposure to further attack or other livelihood trauma increased.

Livelihoods were severely stressed, but it was political disagreements and power struggles, as well as unresolved leadership issues from the previous civil war era, that led to the re-emergence of widespread violence in 2013. Conflict dynamics shifted rapidly after 2013: the focus moved away from the rather localised raiding involving the Murle towards greater conflict between Dinka and Nuer groups, including many battles over control of Bor town. Hence, rather than simple causal factors or linear linkages, a complex web of factors link armed conflict, conflict drivers, and livelihoods. There is no clear linkage between the formal cessation of violent conflict and livelihoods recovery or improvement, and in many cases, no evident 'peace dividend'.

Supporting livelihoods in conflict and 'post-conflict' situations

Post-CPA interventions by international actors were highly variable. In areas of heavy displacement there was a major – if short-lived – emphasis on return and resettlement. In other areas, particularly where displacement was more localised, the levels of support actually dropped in the post-CPA era. It is critical that donors and the South Sudanese government understand and take into account lessons from both the post-CPA/independence period and the post-2013 conflict in future livelihood recovery and peace-building efforts. After widespread conflict broke out in South Sudan in December 2013, external support shifted towards humanitarian assistance; even in areas not affected by the armed conflict in 2014 and 2015, there was a distinct drawing back from engaging with the government in development programmes or service delivery. Livelihood support continued in some areas, and has been incorporated into the humanitarian response, but mostly only in specific geographic areas. International actors tended to withdraw from direct engagement with either the government or the armed opposition (SPLM-IO) in order to avoid the appearance of 'taking sides' or out of disdain for the reported actions of both parties.

As South Sudan's crisis becomes even deeper and more prolonged, however, and more people are displaced over wider areas for longer periods of time, the livelihood options for South Sudanese households and kinship networks become ever more constrained. Many pastoralists have lost their cattle, and farmers are displaced and unable to cultivate. Government employees have not received pay in months or longer. Meanwhile, at the time of this writing, hyper-inflation is affecting the whole economy and the humanitarian aid effort is underfunded and declining. There are scattered reports of people leaving Juba to return to the countryside, having exhausted their urban options. Hundreds of thousands of people have crossed the borders into Uganda, Ethiopia and Sudan. People continue to rely on kinship networks, but under current circumstances, these are very hard pressed to compensate for the extreme pressures on livelihoods that people now face in South Sudan, and are unlikely to bounce

back quickly even if a peace agreement can be reached and more or less adhered to by leaders in Juba.

Conclusion and implications

South Sudan emerged from the CPA and independence as a relatively wealthy country, with oil revenues and foreign aid contributing to public expenditures many times larger than those of its neighbours. Yet, in a country where the vast majority depend on rural livelihoods, only 4% of land was under cultivation and levels of livestock production were well below their potential. The wealth from oil did not necessarily translate into more stable livelihoods for many people, especially those living outside of Juba and other cities. The lack of roads and infrastructure throughout most of the country meant that opportunity remained out of reach for vast swathes of the population. In Jonglei and other remote areas of the country, the reach of the state and the engagement of external actors was limited. Even the provision of basic security was challenging and, in many areas, lacking.

More than five million people in South Sudan are currently in urgent need of humanitarian aid, with nearly one-and-a-half million internally displaced, and now another million refugees. These figures entail large-scale loss of lives and extreme disruption to livelihoods, which will take decades or generations to recover from even if the ongoing civil war were to end tomorrow. What these alarming figures obscure is the dire situation that many people were in prior to the current armed conflict, due to livelihoods stress stemming from the previous civil war(s), ongoing political and inter-communal violence, seasonal natural hazards such as floods and droughts, livestock disease, lack of infrastructure, and the many other extreme challenges that South Sudan has faced from day one. Findings from the SLRC do not support the hypothesis that livelihoods can be expected to recover in a post-conflict environment—particularly in the absence of strong

and sustained support. In some areas of South Sudan, support for livelihoods may have been better during armed conflict than afterward.

South Sudan will eventually emerge from the present crisis, but aid actors must not wait until then to turn their attention back to people's livelihoods. Support for livelihoods and recovery is clearly important, both in conflict and in post-conflict periods. But the links between conflict and livelihoods need to be better understood, led by more localised analysis. Working in circumstances of widespread conflict presents dilemmas for international aid actors, who were forced back into large-scale humanitarian action in 2014 at the apparent expense of longer-term programmes in non-conflict affected areas. Experience from the OLS era indicates that it is possible to provide humanitarian assistance as well as support to livelihoods. Ensuring that support continues post-conflict (or in periods of low-grade conflict) should be a priority in South Sudan.

It is estimated that over five million people in South Sudan are currently in urgent need of humanitarian aid.

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