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Findings around conflict sensitivity and food aid in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal

This briefing paper is based on research conducted by the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) in February and March 2017, and funded by the UK, Switzerland, and Canada.

Key findings

- The ongoing armed conflict and the related economic crisis are at the centre of the food security crisis many face in the former NBeG. Support to ending the armed conflict is key to any longer-term improvements.
- Actual diversion and accusations of misuse of aid reflect negatively on and create mistrust towards government authorities, local and international NGOs, and UN agencies. Better monitoring and communication, and more transparent processes of food aid allocation increase the likelihood of discovering actual misuse, and help to counter rumours and tensions about misuse of food aid.
- Food aid is, in some cases, reallocated by chiefs to give smaller portions of food aid to more people. This practice corresponds with local obligations of mutual support and concepts of vulnerability, but is often rejected by implementing partners and donors. It is important that food aid does not undermine mechanisms of mutual support that are of key significance for the survival of people.
- The subdivision of states, counties, payams and chieftaincies has led in some cases to contested administrative boundaries, constituencies and local authority. This impedes planning, targeting and project implementation and provision of humanitarian assistance at the local level. Furthermore, it contributes to greater risk of conflict over external support, including food aid.

Background

This briefing paper sheds light on some aspects of the conflict sensitivity of food aid in former Northern Bahr el Ghazal (NBeG). In contrast to other states, NBeG has been spared by large scale armed violence, but it is affected by a severe food security crisis that has forced tens of thousands of people to move to Sudan.¹ Food insecurity has been chronic in NBeG, but has been further exacerbated by the economic crisis, large inflows of returnees from Sudan after 2011, a substantial reduction of trade, and the closing of the border with Sudan. At the same time, the operating environment for humanitarian agencies has become more complicated partly due to the creation of new states, counties, payams and chieftaincies. This briefing paper is based on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted in former NBeG (Aweil East and Aweil states) in late February and early March 2017.²

¹ The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) published in February 2017 suggested that of an overall population of about 1,400,000, about 440,000 are in phase 2 (stressed), 560,000 are in phase 3 (crisis) and about 180,000 in phase 4 (emergency). In the case of former NBeG the IPC projects that the population in phase 4 (emergency) will reach 420,000 between May in June 2017.

² The respondents were from a variety of backgrounds. For the sake of protecting respondents and local partners, the report is strictly anonymised.

Unintended consequences of food aid

Challenges in targeting beneficiaries

Most respondents who referred to food insecurity stressed the importance of food aid, but recognised that food aid does not cover all needs. Food aid that reaches only a limited number of people within a community affected by severe food insecurity can lead to conflict and tensions; it also poses a serious challenge to authorities who are expected to help manage and allocate resources. Effective communication with communities and leaders about targeting criteria and quantities of aid provided help to manage expectations and prevent misperceptions.

In some cases, chiefs reallocate food aid in an attempt to support more families in need. South Sudanese concepts of the obligation to share resources (including food aid) often come into conflict with humanitarian agencies' targeting and selection of beneficiaries. More generally, South Sudanese concepts of vulnerability and obligations of mutual support focus on different factors: age, gender, and health are not seen as key indicators for vulnerability, but rather the lack of social relations.³ There is a need for sensitive engagement with local notions of vulnerability and social support to ensure that food aid does not undermine social support mechanisms.

The creation of the new states in late 2015 influences international engagement, including humanitarian aid, in several ways. First, borders and the constituencies of new administrative entities, including chieftaincies, are not clearly defined⁴, and are in some cases contested. In at least one case, food aid was dropped in the "wrong" administrative entity, a local authority claimed. As a result, the community of this other entity appropriated the food aid and the beneficiary community was left out. The subdivision of administrative entities and chieftaincies complicates targeting. Given the dire food security situation, there is a risk that food aid distribution – particularly if the beneficiary community is contested – fosters disputes. Second, it is not always obvious, and in some cases, with the increase of chiefs for example, it is even disputed who constitute the authorities of a particular location. This leads to more disputes over targeting and aid allocation. Third, it is also difficult to ascertain the population in the new administrative entities. As a result, planning and targeting for humanitarian aid and for other forms of international engagement has become more difficult. This also fosters contestations and potentially conflicts over aid.

Accusations of food aid diversion and poor assessments

A considerable number of respondents of diverse backgrounds commented on misappropriation of food aid, asserting that vulnerable people were left out as food aid was allocated to wealthier and better connected individuals. Different groups were accused of being involved in illegitimately appropriating food aid. While some respondents made general statements, others referred to specific cases.

Some chiefs, local government authorities, and police were accused of keeping some food aid for themselves and of favouring relatives and influential individuals. Although such practices were criticised, some respondents noted that chiefs, local authorities, and police were often affected by food insecurity themselves. In Aweil town and in Aweil East, some chiefs were accused of having asked for money for food aid registration. Consequently, vulnerable individuals could only register for food aid after having paid the chiefs. In other cases, chiefs and local authorities were accused of having removed food ration cards from beneficiaries and giving them to their relatives or selling them instead. When challenges occurred in the food distribution was caused by chiefs, these chiefs then accused NGOs of having

³ Harragin, Simon and Changath Chol Chol 1999: The Southern Sudan Vulnerability Study. Nairobi: Save the Children Fund (UK) South Sudan Programme.

⁴ Leonardi, Cherry and Martina Santschi 2016: Dividing Communities in South Sudan and Northern Uganda: Boundary disputes and land governance. Rift Valley Institute.

mismanaged food aid or of having done a poor assessment, UN agency staff explained. Chiefs accuse NGO staff of providing inadequate food to registered beneficiaries while the latter accuse chiefs of inflating lists of beneficiaries. Some chiefs were said to have lost their positions because of illegitimate activities.

Respondents, including chiefs, civil servants, staff of CSOs, and community members accused some higher level authorities, and South Sudanese staff of local and international NGOs and humanitarian agencies of diverting food aid on a larger scale. Interviewees suggested that food aid was embezzled through different mechanisms such as the manipulation of lists of beneficiaries or by collecting ration cards. Furthermore, food aid was allegedly diverted from UN warehouses and during transport, for instance from UN warehouses to NGOs or/and to the beneficiaries. Individuals have been accused of favouritism, of diverting quantities of food aid with the aim of selling it, and of misusing their positions to divert food aid to their own CSOs. The different incidents have generated accusations and counter-accusations between beneficiaries and government officials, civil servants, chiefs as well as NGO and UN agency staff.

This research neither aims at nor has the data to verify the accusations and counter-accusations of poor assessments, poor targeting or/and the misuse and diversion of food aid. However, the claims of respondents show the gravity of the food security crisis in which almost everybody seems to be vulnerable and forced to try to access food aid. The claims also point at the high expectation of food aid that are not necessarily met. In some cases, it seems that lack of information and high expectations lead to misunderstandings. Thus beneficiaries might expect one sack of food aid per household and are frustrated when they receive less. They might suspect authorities, police guarding the food, NGO staff or others to have misappropriated food aid. There have been concrete cases of misuse, illustrating that food aid is a contested resource, particularly in times of crisis. The accusations about misuse of aid also mirror mistrust vis-à-vis some authorities, and some educated individuals working for South Sudanese and international NGOs and agencies. They are seen as diverting aid at the expense of vulnerable people. Given the current food crisis and the suffering it causes among community members, “theft” of food aid was seen as particularly unacceptable and immoral, more so than other forms of corruption.

Approaches mitigating aid diversion

Different approaches and mechanisms exist to mitigate aid diversion. UN agencies had established feedback and reporting mechanisms to address challenges related to food distribution and to avoid misuse of food aid. Some interviewees, however, were critical about the effectiveness of these mechanisms and expected UN agencies to publicly condemn misuse. Some suggested that UN agencies were not openly critical because they did not want to widely share that food aid was embezzled. Others suggested that South Sudanese staff of UN agencies were scared of repercussions when misuse of aid was publically condemned.

In some cases, individuals and groups implicated in the diversion of food aid were held accountable by state and local government authorities. In other cases, authorities did not respond to complaints, interviewees claimed. Individuals criticising embezzlement were – according to respondents - also threatened, for example, by chiefs that they would not be registered for the next distribution. Committees consisting of key actors involved in aid allocation were established in some places to address malpractices; the caveat of this being that some of these actors are themselves accused of being involved in abuse. Church leaders, who are often seen as moral authorities, criticise embezzlement of food aid, for instance during the mass.

Respondents noted that in some areas chiefs are seemingly no longer involved in the identification of beneficiaries and in the allocation of food aid. Instead, agencies and NGOs rely on administrators to handle the distribution of food aid and other forms of assistance. This novel practice has been criticised by ordinary people but also civil servants who were convinced that the involved authorities diverted food aid. Despite allegations of misuse of food aid, chiefs – it was widely assumed – knew their communities

well and were therefore better able to identify vulnerable individuals. In addition, chiefs can be challenged and dismissed by their communities. Consequently, chiefs are seen as being more accountable than other local authorities and employees of CSOs and NGOs.

Conclusion and recommendations

Despite the fact that inhabitants of NBeG are not directly affected by large scale armed conflict, many are affected by a severe food security crisis. As a response, the international community has been distributing emergency aid. This food aid, however, cannot cover all needs, which can lead to tensions within communities. Moreover, international support, including food aid, constitutes one of the few remaining resources in a context in which many are affected by a severe food crisis. Control over food aid is therefore contested, and in some cases diverted or misused. The desperateness of the situation is mirrored in the accusations and actual misuse of food aid and in the migration of tens of thousands of people to Sudan.

Recommendations:

- Support to ending the armed conflict, and its political roots, is key to any longer-term improvements of the food security crisis in former NBeG.
- **Build in additional conflict sensitivity safeguards.** The risk of conflicts over aid resources has increased: administrative entities, boundaries, constituencies, and the responsible local authorities are not always obvious and at times contested. Possible safeguards include investing in additional analysis to ensure thorough understanding of the local context and political economy and creating space for learning and exchange among donors and aid workers to discuss conflict sensitivity issues of their work.
- **Reinforce communication efforts** towards communities on key aspects of targeting criteria, entitlements/allocation and complaint points in order to increase communities' awareness and ability to detect and report aid diversion.
- **Make more regular follow-ups after food aid distribution** to better understand and to respond to potential negative consequences including conflicts over and diversion of aid. This includes more responsive complaint and grievance mechanisms that would also allow to better address negative consequences of aid and accusations of diversion.
- **Address food aid diversion – in the right way.** Actual diversion and accusations of misuse of aid reflect negatively on and create mistrust towards local authorities, local and international NGOs, and UN agencies. In addition, such cases can lead to intra- and inter-communal tensions. Better monitored and more transparent processes of food aid allocation increase the likelihood of discovering any misuse, and could also counter rumours and tensions about misuse of food aid. It is recommended that chiefs be involved in the selection of beneficiaries and in food aid distribution. Chiefs, in contrast to other actors, can directly be held accountable by community members.
- **Understand, work with, and strengthen local support mechanisms.** Sometimes chiefs reallocate food aid by giving smaller portions of food aid to more people. Reallocation is a practice which corresponds with local obligations of mutual support and concepts of vulnerability, but is often rejected by implementing partners and donors. It is important that food aid does not undermine local authorities and mechanisms of mutual support that are of key significance for the survival of people. International actors should understand, work with, and strengthen local governance and local support mechanisms and local concepts of obligations of mutual support and vulnerability. It is important from a conflict sensitivity perspective that agencies are able to distinguish between such reallocations on the one hand, and diversion of aid that weaken local mechanisms of mutual support on the other.