Displacement, Access, and Conflict in South Sudan:
A Longitudinal Perspective

CSRF Desk Research – May 2018

Executive Summary

Contemporary debates about humanitarianism in South Sudan focus on the pressing problems of the present, with access issues and violence against humanitarians understandably at the forefront of donor and humanitarian concerns. While valuable and comprehensible, this focus on the present has meant that the ways in which aid shapes conflict in the long term have not been discussed, and are not well understood by humanitarian actors in South Sudan.

This paper focuses on a particular period of the Sudanese second civil war, 1983-1986, just prior to Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), and analyses the historical structure of the political economy of humanitarianism. It analyses this period – as opposed to the more common contemporary comparison with OLS – because the historical parallels between this period and the current civil war are pertinent to contemporary humanitarian practice. From such an analysis we can learn much about the way that conflict dynamics structure patterns of access and displacement in South Sudan today.

In both periods, control of humanitarian access, and therefore distribution of relief supplies, is contested by a sovereign state and armed groups. In both civil wars, it is thus inevitable that the state and armed groups in question will attempt to shape where aid goes, and that this shaping will partly determine the course of the conflict.

Historically, such shaping has taken a variety of forms. Most obviously, during the second civil war, it has taken the form of aid diversion to fund and feed fighters. However, this paper contends that aid diversion is over-emphasised as the primary form of the relationship between aid and conflict, and that one instead needs to understand aid as part of a broader political economy of plunder and redistribution that typifies southern Sudan during times of war. Controlling access to aid has been *one instrument amongst many* that the governments and armed groups of Sudan and South Sudan have used to wage war and extract economic resources from a population that is strategically pauperised by state power.

This paper argues that understanding the way that aid feeds into and structures conflict requires two elements of analysis:

(1) Understanding how aid becomes a weapon of war. In this paper, the focus shall be on the way that aid, during the period 1983-86, was used to depopulate rural areas in favour of government garrison towns. These population movements, in turn, afforded a series of economic benefits to Sudanese actors associated with the military. In the current civil war, the political-economic goals are different, but the use of access restrictions and the depopulation of rural areas as techniques of war remain. For instance, restrictions of access for aid in Equatoria and Bahr el Ghazal, along with military campaigns targeting villages and civilians on the basis of their ethnicity, has opened up pastures to government loyalists; the logic of these campaigns can only be understood if one understands the denial of aid as one of a series of tools of war designed to ensure the immiseration of a hostile population, and the economic gains of a dominant group.[1]

(2) Understanding how aid becomes an object over which war is fought. The way that aid is politicised has meant that selective distribution of humanitarian relief has become part of a broader pattern of unequal access to resources in situations of contested land rights. These patterns of inequality are one of the drivers of the contemporary conflict (e.g. on the West Bank of the White

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[1] See Interim Report of the Panel of Experts on South Sudan established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2206 (2015), November 2016 (S/2015/656). Paragraphs 14, 34, and 36.

Nile).[2] It behoves donors and humanitarians to understand the way in which contemporary relief aid is instrumentalised, thus laying the ground for future conflict. We must also think urgently about how to mitigate this possibility.

This research paper finds that the selective distribution of relief aid in southern Sudan between 1983 and 1986 had the following political goals, each of which has a parallel in the contemporary civil war:

- **As political propaganda**. In 1986, Equatoria received the majority of the food aid distributed in southern Sudan, even though it only had some 26% of the population of the southern region at the time. This is because the government in Khartoum wished to cultivate support amongst the Equatorians.
- **To destroy the SPLA's support base**. Selective distribution of food to urban centres forced civilians into urban settlements, and out of rural areas. This decreased the SPLA's support base, its potential for new followers, and increased the number of civilians under Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) control.
- **To create a transient labour force**. Attacks on rural areas in Bahr el Ghazal, and the denial of relief aid to those areas, also created a pliant labour force which, immiserated, was willing to work on farms in South Kordofan and South Darfur, while leaving their own land abandoned and unoccupied.
- **Profit**. Starving rural pastoralists sold their cattle to northern merchants at reduced prices; northern merchants sold the same starving pastoralists grain at inflated prices.
- **Wealth transfer**. The selective distribution (and denial) of relief aid is part of a broader political economy in which populations deemed as part of the opposition are raided and looted, and their wealth transferred to the government. Armed opposition, including the SPLA, also used predatory tactics of war, and taxes on local communities, to create a wealth transfer to a military elite.

The paper further takes issue with current perceptions that blame problems of access on command and control issues within the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). It is commonly claimed that lower-level commanders do not receive, or ignore, memos from high-ranking commanders. However, evidence from fieldwork in the current civil war, and the historical period analysed in this paper, indicate that access issues are not command and control problems, but are rather part of a series of broader questions of political economy. In general, an apparent absence of hierarchy is an indication that lower-level commanders are being allowed to obtain resources from the distribution of aid, often because the central state is unable to pay soldiers' wages.

Finally, this paper contends that to understand the provision and denial of relief aid one needs to understand how it functions as part of a broader political economy of war. From 1983-86, as during the current civil war, blockages of aid to areas perceived to be under opposition control were only part of a more total blockage on these area, designed to create a pliant, helpless population, and starve the opposition of support, while also economically benefiting a military elite.

The paper closes with recommendations for humanitarians and policy makers to better understand and navigate issues around rural and urban displacement patterns, unintended resource transfers to conflict actors, and attempts to manipulate aid.

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[2] See Joshua Craze, Small Arms Survey, 'The Conflict in Upper Nile,' 8 March 2016.

Introduction

The relationship between humanitarian relief and the current conflict in South Sudan tends to be understood in terms of a series of pressing present problems. Humanitarians, interested in carrying out their day-to-day work in South Sudan, have focused on issues such as denials of access, violence against humanitarian personnel, and the looting of aid supplies.[3] Equally, advocacy, both within and outside of the donor and humanitarian communities, has focused on access constraints, and their implications for the safety of aid workers, protection issues, and the maintenance of humanitarian principles. The prioritising of such principles has had a number of effects. It has meant that the concept of impartiality has tended to be considered relatively narrowly, as a question of particular local interventions, rather than in terms of whether aid is structurally benefiting one of the belligerent parties.

Such a focus on the present has all too frequently meant that longer-term issues about the way that the provision of aid interacts with conflict in South Sudan are not discussed. Efforts to respond to access constraints too often understand blocks on humanitarian access as iterative, with each blockage to be dealt with on its own terms, as the result of a series of relatively contingent bureaucratic impediments. The difficulty with such an approach is that access constraints are understood in narrowly technical terms, rather than as part of an overarching strategy by armed actors, in which selective humanitarian access constitutes a vital part of military strategy.[4]

This paper uses a longitudinal investigation to examine the relationship of humanitarian aid and assistance to the conflict in southern Sudan in two inter-related ways. First, it questions the understanding of the way in which humanitarian aid both becomes a weapon of war and also becomes one of the contested resources over which war is fought. Second: it investigates the ways in which patterns of displacement and humanitarian access have also created some of the structural aspects of contemporary conflict by creating patterns of unequal access to resources and situations of contested land rights.

This analysis focuses on the period from 1983-86 – though the Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) period is also referenced – because of the extent to which it resonates with the structure of the contemporary civil war. The themes chosen for elucidation were not chosen innocently, but rather because of the ways they either form part of the historical developments that shape the present conflict in South Sudan, or provide important instances of past historical practice that show how much of the contemporary conflict repeats the patterns of the second civil war.

Aid and Neutrality

Despite formal humanitarian commitments to neutrality, and memorandums of understanding signed with the South Sudanese government that appear to give humanitarian actors the right to access civilian populations without needing the partisan behest of political and military elites, the provision of humanitarian aid in South Sudan has never stood outside of conflict. Powerful forces – primarily the South Sudanese state and military – guarantee the distribution of relief supplies. It is inevitable that these forces shape where aid goes, and that this shaping, in turn, partly determines the course of the current conflict.

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[3] Recent data from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in South Sudan suggests that there were 1,159 incidents against humanitarian actors in the country in 2017. UN OCHA. South Sudan: Humanitarian Access Overview (January-December 2017). 15 February 2018.

[4] See, inter alia, Joshua Craze, Small Arms Survey, 'The Conflict in Upper Nile', Geneva, Small Arms Survey, March 2016.

There are decades of precedents for these forces. Historically, such shaping has taken on a variety of forms. During the second civil war, it was the Sudanese government, the SPLA, and a variety of militia groups that defined such distributions of aid. The SPLA and other armed groups relied on aid diversion during the second civil war to fund and feed fighters. However, access to aid and the role of humanitarianism in displacement is much more subtle than simple diversion. Over the course of the last forty years in southern Sudan, aid has become embedded within the rhythm of conflict: humanitarian relief not only helps to alleviate the suffering caused by conflict; it is also one of the mechanisms by which conflict has been extended.[5] The Sudanese government, the SPLA and other armed groups routinely used forced displacement as a tool of war.[6] Equally, both sides used the distribution and provision of aid to influence the movement of civilians, and repeatedly blocked humanitarian access to given communities despite formal agreements guaranteeing such access to NGOs and the humanitarian community.

> *Denials of humanitarian access, and subsequent distributions of humanitarian aid, are the result of political strategies to shape the distribution of resources.*

The Political Economy of Aid Distribution

During the current civil war, humanitarian access issues have frequently been rendered as issues of command and control. In interviews with the author in Unity State in 2014-15, in Upper Nile in 2015-16, and in Central Equatoria in 2017, humanitarians repeatedly blamed a lack of hierarchy within the SPLM/A for access issues.[7] As the humanitarians interviewed understood it, the government in Juba had granted humanitarian access to areas and populations from which the humanitarian community were being restricted by ground-level commanders, who were deviating from the script written in Juba. In the view of those humanitarians, the solution would be to have *more* central government control over its own forces, so that the government can live up to its own commitments. In such an understanding of the situation, blockages on humanitarian aid are contingent. They are the result of the will of a particular commander on a given day, rather than a concerted plan to deny aid to a given population at a given time.

The history of the second civil war in southern Sudan suggests that the relationship between humanitarian access and conflict is not a history of difficult command and control issues, and thus the solution to the problem is not somehow finding more acquiescent commanders, or making sure the government has a more effective military hierarchy.[8] Rather, denials of humanitarian access, and subsequent distributions

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[5] This paper will refer to South Sudan when it refers to the sovereign nation-state post-secession on 9 July 2011, and southern Sudan when it refers to the region roughly approximate to the (as yet undemarcated) nation of South Sudan, prior to secession, when it was a part of Sudan.

[6] Inter alia. Douglas Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Oxford, James Currey, 2003, p.145).

[7] Confidential author interviews in what are now, post Salva Kiir's most recent edict on 14 January 2017 – which transformed the 28 states of South Sudan into 32 state – the states of Northern Liech, Southern Liech, Ruweng, Central Upper Nile, Northern Upper Nile, Fashoda, and Jubek.

[8] A common variant of this story that the author heard amongst veterans of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) is that in the contemporary period, an over-emphasis on security officers for humanitarians mean that the valuable human relations between humanitarians and the SPLA that led to effective communication during the OLS period no longer exist. What a survey of the existing literature suggests is that this is to turn an objective story of political economy into a subjective story of personnel relations: the reason that the SPLA was willing to listen to members of OLS was not because they had become good friends, but because those humanitarians were willing to do things that suited the SPLA's political interests at the time. See, inter alia, Holly Philpot, 'Operation Lifeline Sudan: Challenges During Conflict and Lessons Learned.' (University of Denver, 2011).

of humanitarian aid, are the result of political strategies to shape the distribution of resources. In the current civil war, payments to local commanders for the passage of relief supplies, for instance, are not the result of an absence of command and control in Juba, but rather the result of a political decision made in Juba that local forces should make up shortfalls in their wages by demanding payments from humanitarian organisations.

In the second civil war, there were similar economic dynamics at play, which influenced the distribution of aid. For instance, in 1986, and thus prior to Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS), the majority of the relief received by southern Sudan was sent to the Equatorias, which constituted some 26% of the population of the southern region, but received approximately 62% of the aid.[9] This was not simply a question of access being limited by conflict or the rainy season; major population centres in Greater Bahr el Ghazal were reachable. Rather, the Sudanese government was trying to cultivate support in the Equatorias as a counterweight to the SPLA -dominance in the Greater Bahr el Ghazal, and facilitating access to the region for relief aid was one of the fundamental ways that the government in Khartoum could do so. Given that the government necessarily mediates relief aid – then as now – and populations are aware of this fact, the provision and distribution of aid is necessarily determined in relationship to questions of clientelism and government control.

In the current civil war, as in the second civil war, the stakes of the conflict are as much about control of populations (and the resources they attract via the intercession of the humanitarian community) as they are about the control of land.

Allowing relief provision to occur can function as propaganda for the government and armed groups, or as a reward for services rendered. The prior condition explains the distribution of relief aid to the Equatorias in 1986, while the latter condition explains why the government, in 2017, re-opened access to humanitarian NGOs to allow them to deliver food aid to Kodok, Upper Nile, after security forces recaptured the town. This was done to reward the Shilluk fighters and civilians who had split from Johnson Olonyi, the opposition commander, and reluctantly joined the government side. In the second civil war, as in the present conflict, allowing humanitarian access and thus the provision of relief aid forms a part of neo-patrimonial system of government, in which resources are redistributed within a patronage system that rewards service, or attempts to seduce new clients.[10]

Patterns of Assistance: Rural and Urban

The relief that did arrive in the largely SPLA controlled area of Bahr el Ghazal prior to the beginning of OLS overwhelmingly went to urban settlements, including Aweil and Raja, which tended to be SAF garrison towns. Often, during the second civil war, and into the period of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) from 2005-11, the geographic coverage of the humanitarian agencies and the agenda of the government (whether it is the Sudanese government in the period from 1983-2005, or the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) dominated government of Southern Sudan in the subsequent period) eerily overlapped.[11] For humanitarians, urban settlements offer more accessible and stable environments, such as Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. Population densities in urban areas,

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[9] Keen, *The Benefits of Famine*, p.138.

[10] See, inter alia, Alex de Waal, 'When Kleptocracy becomes insolvent: Brute causes of the civil war in South Sudan', *African Affairs*, Volume 113, Issue 452, 2014, pp. 347–369.

[11] See, inter alia. David Keen, *Complex Emergencies* (London, Polity, 2008, pp. 149-170).

relative to rural environments, allow for more cost-effective distribution of relief items. Problems of double counting are lessened; the consequences of aid intervention are more calculable and easily observed; the logistics of supplying urban environments are easier; they are often perceived as safer.[12] All of these reasons for preferring to deliver relief aid in urban environments are relatively internal to the environments themselves: they are technical considerations, rather than political judgements about which side to pick in a war. Similar evaluations underlie contemporary preferences for service provision and protection in the Protection of Civilians (PoCs) sites housed in UN bases around South Sudan, rather than in rural environments.[13]

In Bahr el Ghazal during the second civil war, a policy of urban aid relief was nonetheless consonant with the goals of the Sudanese government. This was not simply because some of the aid was diverted by military units stationed in garrison towns, though that is also true.[14] Rather, the presence of relief aid in urban settlements had concomitant effects on rural-urban relations that were part of an overarching government strategy to transform the political economy of the region. To simply look at the diversion of food aid is misplaced, both because it is often hard to delineate who is a soldier and who is a civilian in conflict in southern Sudan, and more importantly, because the overarching political stakes of the control of humanitarian aid do not depend on diversion, but on the selective distribution of relief as a weapon of war.

As an exemplary case, this paper examines the denial of food aid to rural areas in Bahr el Ghazal, in the period between 1983-86, and the direction of relief efforts into SAF-controlled garrison towns. Such a practice meant that rural populations, starved of food, fled into the towns, where there was the possibility of accessing relief aid, albeit under government control. This was not an accidental feature of the Sudanese government's aid policy: it was a deliberate tactic. From 1983-86 the Sudanese government refused to allow humanitarians to carry out relief delivery in rural areas. As the same time, SAF (and associated militias) attacked rural populations. The Sudanese government's strategy was both military *and* one of restricting humanitarian access. Its result was to create waves of rural to urban depopulation and displacement, which in turn deprived the SPLA of a potential support base, potential new members, and increased the population under the control of the Sudanese military forces.[15]

This pattern of population control finds echoes in the contemporary conflict. In Unity State from 2013-15, for example, the population adopted a form of humanitarian transhumance, moving between available aid resources in an attempt to survive.[16] Conflict actors sought to shape this movement, and force civilians into areas under their control, which are then also the areas to which humanitarians are given relatively unfettered access. In the current civil war, as in the second civil war, the stakes of the conflict are as much about control of populations (and the resources they attract via the intercession of the humanitarian

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[12] Mark Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars*, (London, Zed Books, 2001, pp. 75-106).

[13] See Joshua Craze and Jérôme Tubiana, *A State of Disunity: Conflict Dynamics in Unity State, South Sudan, 2013-15*, (Geneva, Small Arms Survey, 2016, pp. 145-151).

[14] Relief workers working during the period put the amount of divestment by the military at around 20% of the total aid. Interviews, Juba, 2010, Malakal, 2012, Juba, December 2017. The aid that went to the military was acquired in many ways, familiar to us today in the current conflict: unofficial military "taxes," civilians giving (or being forced to give) aid supplies to soldiers, soldiers pretending to be civilians, and soldiers' families receiving aid and giving it to the military.

[15] It is also the case that during the second civil war much of the southern Sudanese population fled to Sudan, and other neighboring countries. During the current civil war, much of the population has led to Uganda and Sudan. However, while these massive population movements are incredibly important, they should not blunt our efforts to understand how displacement works as a tool of war within southern Sudan.

[16] See Joshua Craze and Jérôme Tubiana, *A State of Disunity*, p.142.

community) as they are about the control of land.[17] In the Equatorias and Bahr el Ghazal, security forces now control the same urban centres once controlled by SAF. Having learnt from the Sudanese military, it now uses the same tactics. The military displacement of people, and the subsequent deployment of humanitarian relief as an attractor for displaced and hungry people, must be seen as two aspects of a single strategy.

As during the period from 1983-86, humanitarians in the current civil war prefer focusing aid operations on urban settlements, for similar reasons to those previously discussed in this paper. Discussions related to resilience and recovery programming are similarly framed around urban areas as hubs of stability. As during the second civil war, this focus on urban areas has allowed security forces to largely shape the flows of displacement that have occurred in South Sudan over the last few years. For instance, the presence of aid and relief supplies in PoCs such as Rubkona-Bentiu, in a context where armed actors are forcibly displacing populations and destroying livelihoods, is part of the reason that the rural areas of Unity have become increasingly depopulated. This has functioned as an effective weapon: that the humanitarians are willing to focus their operations on the PoC in Rubkona has meant that civilians have fled to areas under government control, depriving the opposition of potential recruits, and leaving land depopulated. Government pressure to close POCs does not reflect a policy of returning IDPs to their places of origin, but rather to enable officials to better monitor and control both the displaced populations and the aid they receive. In Unity, as elsewhere in South Sudan, the choice for civilians was stark: either flee the country to Ethiopia, Uganda, or Sudan, or move into government controlled areas. Military forces and militias subsequently looted the now depopulated areas.[18] While the focus on urban over rural areas is considered by many humanitarians as a technical issue, it has unavoidable political consequences, and is part of the military strategy to consolidate control over areas such as Unity state.

Wealth Transfer: Cattle, Land, Labour and Resources

The pre-OLS period, however, also exhibited a number of dynamics that the current conflict does not. The denial of both food aid and trade in the rural regions of Bahr el Ghazal created a transient and cheap labour force: those that did not move to the garrison towns of Bahr el Ghazal moved further north to Sudan, to work on large-scale agricultural farms, or else ended up in the vast IDP camps that surrounded Khartoum.[19] This creation of a labour force under conditions of war finds no parallel in the current civil war, in a South Sudan whose economy has not created the sort of capital-heavy industries that would absorb such a population.

Rather, the current civil war has occurred within an economy that is still in many respects pastoralist, and the political economy of the war has afforded government-affiliated forces many opportunities. For instance, during the 2015 SPLA offensive in southern Unity, there was a massive displacement of the population from rural areas towards either Bentiu, the state capital, or to sites like Dablual, where the government allowed humanitarians to operate. The SPLA and affiliated militias then had effectively free rein to operate in the dispossessed rural areas, and capture the herds of southern Unity; many of these cattle were then driven to Bentiuor back to Mayom, whence many of the raiders originated, or driven by senior military officials to their home areas or to Juba for sale.[20] In 2017, during the military offensive in

[17] Clémence Pinaud, 'South Sudan: Civil War, Predation, and the Making of a Military Aristocracy,' *African Affairs*, 113/451, pp. 192-211. See, for the classic statement of this understanding of warfare,

[18] See Joshua Craze and Jérôme Tubiana, *A State of Disunity: Conflict Dynamics in Unity State, South Sudan, 2013-15*, (Geneva, Small Arms Survey, 2016, pp. 145-151).

[19] See Alex de Waal, 'Some Comments on Militias in the Contemporary Sudan.' In Martin Daly and Ahmed Alawad Sikainga, eds., *Civil War in the Sudan*, (London, British Academic Press, 1993, pp. 144-151).

[20] See Joshua Craze, Small Arms Survey, 'The Conflict in Unity State,' 23 February 2016.

Equatoria, the displacement of the Equatorian population allowed Dinka pastoralists allied with the government to graze their cattle on the land previously used by the displaced population.[21] Thus, in the current civil war, displacement has not created a surplus labour force, but within a principally pastoralist economy it has functioned to allow government forces to accumulate more cattle, and to exploit grazing land "freed up" by displacement and strategies of granting selective humanitarian access. This practice finds its echo in the second civil war, where commanders also took advantage of displacement to capture new grazing lands for their cattle, and enrich themselves.

Today, just as in the second civil war, the resources and survival strategies of pastoralists have been stretched to a breaking point in the current conflict. During the second civil war, in the pre-OLS period, as is often the case for pastoralists in times of crisis, the Dinka afflicted by scarcity in the rural regions of

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Bahr el Ghazal were also forced to sell off much of their cattle at below market rates to northern merchants in order to buy food; conversely, northern merchants made a profit from grain prices by charging over the odds to desperate southern pastoralists.[22] During the current conflict, herds have also been decimated, and the resources of civilians stretched increasingly thinly, often selling their remaining livelihood assets (such as livestock) at low prices to those who have the resources or power to seize the opportunity.

Two important points emerge here that must be understood if we are to better comprehend the political economy of humanitarian assistance in southern Sudan more generally.

First: the provision and denial of aid has to be placed alongside other movements and blockages to be comprehensible. The SAF blockade of the rural areas of Bahr el Ghazal involved blocking relief aid, to be sure, but also blocking the movement of traders into rural territory. This strategy was designed to force people to the towns, render an acquiescent population for labour in northern Sudan, and to profit from those very peoples' poverty through the control of grain and cattle markets. The provision and denial of humanitarian access was only a part of this broader socio-economic strategy. This is analogous to the situation in Equatoria during the current conflict.[23] Blockage of aid to areas perceived to be under opposition control is only part of a more total blockage designed to create a more pliant, helpless population concentrated in urban areas under the control of security forces, starve the opposition of support, and depopulate rural areas that can then be either looted or settled by government supporters. To understand the consequences of the denial of humanitarian access, then and now, requires a holistic analysis that places access-denials alongside the other military strategies used by SAF, during the second civil war, and by the SPLA and other armed groups, during the current conflict.

Second: the example of Bahr el Ghazal from 1983-86 indicates that the problem with government-controlled relief aid is not simply that well-placed governmental officials, and the business people to whom they are linked get rich. It is rather that these officials get rich through the immiseration of the rest of the country. In recent analysis of politics in Sudan and South Sudan, Alex de Waal's concept of a

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[21] See Interim Report of the Panel of Experts on South Sudan established pursuant to Security Council resolution 2206 (2015), November 2016 (S/2015/656).

[22] Oxfam-UK. 'Note on the Food and Security Situation in Wau.' 23 March 1986.

[23] Interviews, members of the SPLA-IO, location withheld, 2016 & 2017.

'political marketplace' has gained extended traction.[24] What this analysis tends to occlude is that the making of a military aristocracy – to use Clémence Pinaud's phrase – through predation in times of war is not simply a marketplace of exchange, where the aristocracy compete to redistribute resources; it is also a massive wealth transfer, and the creation of a newly dependent class of individuals, shorn of resources and dependent on that aristocracy.

During the period from 1983-86, for instance, the real cause of the relative increase in wealth for a number of northern merchants, military leaders and militias was the impoverishment of a southern rural population that was first forced to sell its cattle and then to become something of an agricultural labour force in South Kordofan and Darfur. In the current civil war, fighting in southern Unity (2014 and 2015) and Upper Nile (2016 and 2017), has also effectuated a large wealth transfer in terms of livestock and resources, this time across ethnic lines, as rival militias have enriched themselves at the cost of the Nuer of southern Unity and the Shilluk of Upper Nile. Opposition-aligned militias have also benefited from resources violently extracted from populations thought to be aligned with the government. Indeed, given the lack of real wealth entering South Sudan during the current conflict, we have witnessed something of a race to the bottom, with practices of predation such as raiding and the forced displacement of civilian populations followed by the theft of their possessions, focused on fewer and fewer available resources. This large-scale wealth transfer has left deep divisions in South Sudan, which, even if there is an end to the current civil war, will be very difficult to heal.

That the whole county is increasingly pauperised by the current conflict should not blunt our appreciation for the fact that this war is also a large-scale wealth transfer to some elites. During the second civil war, the distribution of relief aid to government garrison towns did not prevent the immiseration of the rural areas of Bahr el Ghazal, just as during the current conflict, the distribution of relief aid to government controlled areas has shaped the immiseration of large swathes of South Sudan, by becoming part of the reason that civilian populations are forced into (largely urban) government controlled areas, leading to a total absence of resources in rural areas and focused wealth in those territories under government control.

The Battle for Hearts and Stomachs

To return to the period from 1983-86, it is thus unsurprising that the SPLA took a dim view of the relief aid that was going to SAF garrison towns. In John Garang's words, "[The] garrison towns in the South are famine-stricken and are real disaster areas, and this is good, our military strategy is working."[25] The military strategy in question was to lay siege to the garrison towns and try to interrupt supplies going to SAF and the urban population. As Africa Watch argued in *Food and Power in Sudan: A Critique of Humanitarianism*:

"The siege tactics cut normal urban-rural links. Before the war, large parts of rural Southern Sudan were dependent on regular interaction with the towns for economic survival. Rural people sold cattle, fish, and produce in towns, and many depended on seasonal labour, in order to buy grain and consumer goods such as salt, soap, and clothes. As these links withered, economic life in the villages stagnated."[26]

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[24] See Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War, and Business of Power*, (Polity, London, 2015, pp. 69-108).

[25] John Garang in Mansour Khalid (ed.), *John Garang Speaks*, (London, Kegan Paul, 1987, p.71).

[26] Africa Watch, *Food and Power in Sudan: A Critique of Humanitarianism*, (Africa Watch, London, 1997, p.87).

The SPLA's attempt to disrupt aid to the garrison towns made military and political sense. SAF often used the same trains that it used to bring in relief aid to also bring in military supplies.[27] However, this flagrant mixing of the military and humanitarian should not blind us to all the ways in which it is the very provision of relief aid to urban settlements *as such* that attracted the SPLA's ire, even if SAF had not been mixing the military and the humanitarian in convoys for the garrison towns. Even without those military supplies, the distribution of food aid to garrison towns weakened the SPLA's grip on its rural strongholds by contributing to their depopulation.[28]

Both sides were thus effectively attempting to starve the other out, through siege tactics (used by both sides), and through the denial of food aid as a tactic (in the case of the government in Khartoum). Simultaneously, both sides were also attempting to undermine the subsistence base of a hostile population, in the hope of attracting that population to areas under their respective control. In the parlance of the contemporary American military, it was less a battle for hearts and minds, than for hearts and stomachs. In conditions of scarcity, the location of relief efforts is necessarily a political question that enters into, and transforms, an existing political economy of rural-urban labour relations.

Displacement thus becomes a consequence of the denial of relief aid in a given area, as people are pushed out by a combination of violence and the absence of food with which they can sustain themselves in a rural area, *and* as the consequence of relief aid being distributed in another (government-controlled) area. People are attracted to government- or opposition-controlled areas by the possibility of sustaining themselves, and thus the provision of support in these areas plays a part in attempts to control a pliant population and deprive their opponents of support. The actor playing the role of government in this play has changed from the government of Sudan to the government of South Sudan and armed groups, but all too often, the humanitarian community is playing the same role.[29]

SAF assaults during this period tended to serve the Sudanese government's agenda when negotiating with humanitarians. For instance, government attacks on the SPLA, and SPLA attacks on government convoys (carrying mixed military and relief aid) around Raja and Wau in 1987 were cited as evidence of a lack of security, and a further reason why relief aid could not be delivered to rural areas. Here there is direct analogy to the contemporary conflict, and the way that military offensives (e.g. in Leer, Unity state, in 2014, 2015, and 2016) cause humanitarians to pull out, forcing the

Analyses of need by the WFP are quantitative, rather than political. Such calculations of food insecurity, based on access to food and nutritional information, cannot contain political calculations.

population to move to government-controlled areas in order to obtain relief aid, only to return to its home area once it is under government control and the NGOs are told it is safe to return, thus consolidating government control of these areas.

During the second civil war, the distribution of relief aid under conditions of both acute scarcity and politicisation led to anger at every part of the process. In 1987, for instance, in Raja, SAF told townspeople that a recent WFP food delivery – intended for Wau – was to be delivered to the SPLA: the very group that many residents of Raja blamed for their own travails. Large-scale looting of the sorghum store swiftly

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[27] David Keen, *The Benefits of Famine*, pp. 145-6.
[28] Simultaneously, the SPLA were also attempting to maximise food aid going to areas under their own control, often by inflating the numbers of people in these areas, or mixing up civilians with military fighters.
[29] See, Joshua Craze, 'The Mission of Forgetting,' *Chimurenga*, May 2016.

took place.[30] In a situation of scarcity, relief aid definitively takes on a particular political colouring. These questions of political economy are often poorly dealt with through existing humanitarian metrics. Analyses of need by the WFP are quantitative, rather than political.[31] Such calculations of food insecurity, based on access to food and nutritional information, cannot contain political calculations. Moreover, the mandate of the humanitarian community itself – during the second civil war and during the contemporary conflict – does not contain the conceptual resources that would allow it to make political decisions about where aid is distributed: a commitment to impartiality explicitly forbids such calculations, even if it is that very same commitment that leads to humanitarian aid being politicised.

Recent work on the current conflict emphasises that once the South Sudanese oil revenue crashed at the beginning of the current conflict, "aid became the new oil."[32] The point is well-taken, however, it is important to emphasise that before aid became the new oil, during the CPA period, oil itself was the new aid, as a military aristocracy within the SPLA used to manipulating aid flows during the second civil war manipulated new flows of oil revenue in the CPA period. What this should indicate is that the period of peace from 2005-13 should not be viewed as structurally opposed to the wars that preceded and succeeded it. In periods of war and in periods of peace, there is a continuous political economic struggle for resources in southern Sudan (now South Sudan), in which aid is continuously manipulated in an effort to control populations.

Conclusion

In reviewing the history of the relationship of displacement and humanitarian access to conflict prior to the current civil war, several distinct phases emerge. This report has focused on the period prior to the beginning of OLS, in order to emphasise the broader political-economic structures in which aid distribution is entangled. However, it is the OLS period to which the current humanitarian effort is most often compared. There are frequent critiques of OLS in the academic literature.[33] Some of these critiques are centred on the partisan nature of the relief distribution, and the ease with which it was often manipulated by the SPLA. However, in comparison to the contemporary conflict, some strong distinctions emerge.

While during OLS, the primary relief infrastructure was based in Kenya, contemporary humanitarian agencies are based in Juba, and this creates a number of noticeable shortcomings. Many interviewees claimed that there is a degree of 'Juba-think', which blinds agencies to the situation on the ground, and tends to make them see everything through from the perspective of the government.[34] The centrality of Juba to all decision-making and infrastructural decisions also means that the provision of aid is politically instrumentalised at a much more fundamental level. In the current civil war, it is less a question of particular aid supplies being diverted to military personnel as it is the entire aid industry now being dependent on a government whose own revenue (and expenditure) is beggared by the amount of donor financing going into the country.[35] For instance, there are a limited number of trucking companies that

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[30] Africa Watch, *Denying the "Honor of Living": Sudan, a Human Rights Disaster*, (London, Africa Watch, 1990, p.127).

[31] Interviews with WFP personnel, Juba, December 2017. See also, Stefanie Glinski, How to Declare a Famine: A primer from South Sudan,' *IRIN*, 5 March 2018.

[32] 'The Unintended Consequences of Humanitarian Action in South Sudan: Headline Findings." United States Institute of Peace, December 2017, unpublished draft.

[33] See Africa Watch, *Food and Power in Sudan: A Critique of Humanitarianism* for the most trenchant of these critiques.

[34] Interviews with humanitarians, Juba, December 2017.

[35] Interviews with humanitarians, Nairobi & Juba, December 2017.

WFP can use to deliver aid around the country. Some of those companies are regional (Kenyan, Ethiopian), but none can operate inside South Sudan without political backing from within the government, and that inevitably means payoffs to figures within the political administration.[36] Thus one of the principal problems for current humanitarian actors is very different to those encountered during the second civil war. Money paid to use infrastructural services inside South Sudan is inevitably going to military and opposition forces that are engaged in conflict with devastating displacement consequences for civilians throughout the country. However, this relationship between humanitarianism and the military remains effectively invisible, because it is not a case of particular, identifiable, aid diversions, or the manipulation of given sites of aid distribution, as much as it is that the cost of doing business to some extent, fuels the conflict that humanitarian actors seek to remedy.

Humanitarian agencies are now based in Juba, which perversely seems to decrease the level of knowledge about the situation on the ground. Humanitarian workers with long experience of OLS and the pre-OLS period stated that today, there is far less connection between humanitarian agencies and ground-level military commanders.[37] Contemporary humanitarian workers complain that aid is blocked and diverted, despite the insistence of high-ranking officials that this should not happen. The warm memories of those who took part in OLS may partly be a spectre, but they resonate with contemporary complaints about the absence of command and control. One WFP official reported that to get a food truck from Juba to Bentiu requires going through at least one hundred checkpoints, and paying "fees" and bribes to both government and opposition actors.[38]

Previous fieldwork in Bentiu and Rubkona counties suggests that such an "absence" of command and control is actually very much commanded and controlled.[39] In the absence of the means to pay troops properly, the military command encourages its soldiers to find their own means of survival. Whatever the claims of the military command at Bilpam, these minor tactics of predation actually constitute an important income stream for the SPLA, as well as for armed opposition groups. Indeed, it is predation upon humanitarian aid that has increasingly become one of the central income streams for soldiers on the ground.[40] Thus, the shift in command and control may not be a function of the Juba-think and humanitarian disconnection from the ground, but rather a reflection of a political economic reality in which the fragmentation of control is a way for a class of armed actor to continue to be able to support themselves in the absence of a viable government revenue stream outside of the oil industry.

What remains central, if one is to understand the role that humanitarian assistance and the provision of relief aid plays in conflict in southern Sudan, both in the second civil war and in present, is to comprehend the broader political economy in which displacement and the selective distribution of access to relief aid are two tools in an ongoing struggle, by the government or armed actors (be it Khartoum or Juba) to maximise control over a population, and immiserate a rural population that sides with its enemies.

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[36] See the recent report by *The Sentry* for analogous means by which such payments are made. The Sentry, *Fuelling Atrocities: Oil and War in South Sudan*. March 2018.
[37] Interviews in Juba and Nairobi, December 2017.
[38] Interview, Juba, December 2017.
[39] Interviews in Malakal, July 2015, Bentiu, December 2014, Rubkona, December 2014.
[40] Interviews with SPLA soldiers, Malakal, July 2015, Juba, December 2017.

Recommendations

This paper has identified a number of dynamics during the second Civil War period of 1983-86, in Greater Bahr el Ghazal, that resonate with the humanitarian dilemma in the current civil war. The following concluding section of this paper isolates these dynamics and makes some recommendations for what actions humanitarians might usefully consider in order to mitigate their consequences.

Rural/Urban Displacement

In order not to be a part of a concerted military campaign to depopulate rural areas perceived by the government as hostile, humanitarian actors have to be wary about establishing relief efforts in urban settlements under the control of the government. This is no doubt difficult to do. It might involve negotiations that ask for quid pro quo arrangements in which urban food and aid distributions are only carried out on the basis that equitable distributions are allowed to occur in rural areas. This is additionally difficult because of the pronounced preference many humanitarian agencies have for working in urban environments. However, if the humanitarian community is not to be a part of any military strategy, a fuller commitment to rural distribution of aid is necessary, and an awareness of when an armed actor *removing* access restrictions may itself be part of the war effort. That restrictions on humanitarian access are removed should not mean that humanitarians should immediately return to a given site, unless one first understands how the removal of such restrictions plays a part in war efforts. Humanitarian assessments of such situations must analyse the dynamics of access in terms of the broader political economy of the current civil war.

Unintended Resource Transfers to Armed Groups

At present, the humanitarian community financially supports the war effort in two senses.

(1) Some of the money paid to use infrastructural services inside South Sudan is inevitably going to military and opposition forces that are engaged in displacing civilians throughout the country. This is especially the case with trucking companies. Options for reducing the humanitarian dependence on infrastructure that benefits conflict actors should be explored and tested.

(2) Running local relief operations requires paying-off commanders. Using planes based outside of South Sudan would possibly mitigate this problem, as one would side-step many of the checkpoints at which such fees are paid. Another additional possibility would be to direct cash payments to civilians at humanitarian sites, though the success of such payments would be conditional upon there being an extant market at which such cash payments could be effective. Cash programming also carries its own conflict sensitivity risks.[41]

Manipulation of Aid

At present, humanitarian relief is providing a lifeline for much of the South Sudanese population. Yet, at the same time, humanitarian relief, and its selective distribution, dictated by the government, is itself an important part of military strategy. Evaluating how humanitarian relief could be made more effective under these circumstances involves a series of structural questions: should the humanitarian effort still be based in Juba? Would its pernicious side effects be lessened if it were devolved to the regions, or else placed outside the country, as during OLS?

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[41] See Edward Thomas, *Cash-Based Programmes and Conflict.* (Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, April 2018)

There are also local questions. What are the political-economic consequences of aid distribution occurring in government-controlled areas in Equatoria? These considerations, in each of the regions of South Sudan, require greater thought. In addition, the humanitarian community should develop more thorough standards for deciding when the pernicious consequences of a relief operation outweigh its possible positive consequences. Aid operations tend only to pull out of an area when their security is threatened. This paper recommends that there should be much higher standards for assessing the efficacy of a relief operation in terms of its political economic consequences. If the humanitarian community acted collectively, and ceased operations when humanitarian operations themselves became part of the war effort, then pernicious consequences could be avoided. In addition, if such red lines were much stronger, a much more robust conversation could be had with the South Sudanese government, which is reliant on relief operations in multiple respects. If urban distribution of aid was made conditional on equivalent rural distribution in opposition-held areas, for instance, some of the displacement that is occurring in South Sudan, in which aid distribution is playing a role, could be ameliorated, if not stopped.

Such a formalisation of red lines requires a broad discussion within the humanitarian community about the way that the distribution of aid plays a part in the current civil war. It is a difficult discussion, to be sure, but a necessary one.