

Caught Between Two Cultures

When aid in South Sudan is pulled between local norms and western systems

Research conducted in former Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Juba, and Akobo
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“If food aid is not shared, it becomes a divider”

Summary of Recommendations

Social Support Mechanisms

Social support mechanisms are of key importance for the survival of most South Sudanese. Yet, they have been heavily impacted by the conflict and consequent economic crisis.

- Programmes designed to foster social support mechanisms should include indicators to routinely measure the impact of conflict and economic crisis on these structures over time. Design should adapt accordingly to avoid harm.

Vulnerability and targeting

South Sudanese and western concepts of vulnerability and targeting sometimes differ. While local definitions tend to consider vulnerability at the household level and emphasise locally relevant indicators, external actors focus on the individual level and apply global indicators.

- Inform local authorities and communities about planned activities, amount of aid available and about targeting criteria before project inception.
- Adapt notions and criteria of vulnerability and targeting to local context by working with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and by involving chiefs and other local stakeholders.
- Encourage adaptation of targeting to the context and local dynamics (for example, the arrival of Internally Displaced Persons [IDPs]).
- Increase understanding of host community-IDP relations and support. Measure the impact of arrivals on host community coping mechanisms and adapt programming as needed to ensure they are not damaged or depleted as a consequence of assistance to IDPs.

Local participation versus local interference

Aid workers engaging with local authorities and communities repeatedly face situations where local participation turns into (perceived) local interference with aid targeting and delivery.

- Introduce different types of feedback mechanisms to ensure inclusive access and thus a comprehensive picture of perspectives.
- Build in programme resources to engage continuously with leaders and communities to capture needs and grievances, but also to get better and longer-term insights into local dynamics and people’s perceptions of aid.
- Implement targeting and verification mechanisms with the flexibility to respond to the complex and dynamic nature of displacement and population movements.
- Explain and share recruitment guidelines and HR procedures but also understand the motives of local authorities and the pressures they face.
- Counter rumours of malpractice in geographical targeting by providing more information about targeting criteria, targeting processes and decisions. This should include information on humanitarian principles.
- Use different communication channels to provide aid-related information to communities and build in more Communicating with Communities (CwC)/Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP)/Communications and Community Engagement (CCE) into programmes.

Aid workers' risks of being caught between two systems

In South Sudan, aid workers are often caught between international aid policies, guidelines and procedures countering misuse of aid, fraud and corruption, and reality and norms on the ground. In particular, NGO staff in the field who closely engage with local authorities and communities have to navigate these different realities and face different challenges and risks.

- Policies should be adapted to be more contextualised and to reduce stress and risks faced by field staff: Hold listening sessions with staff in field locations to gain their feedback on policy disconnects with the local context. Where possible and appropriate, allow space for these policies to be adapted to local contexts.
- Introduce training and scenario-based role plays to help new staff handle pressure from authorities and/or communities regarding targeting, hiring practices and other sensitivities.
- Establish a clear internal policy and process by which local staff and partners can report pressure, exertion of influence and accusations of favouritism from authorities and community members on such sensitivities. This should be based on consultations with local staff and partners to better understand the pressures and corresponding risks they face. Response measures should include support from senior and/or non-local colleagues as appropriate, taking into account distinct ethnic, gender-based and age-based risk profiles.
- Allow sensitive decisions to be informed by local staff, but responsibility taken by senior staff who are far away from the field location.

Topics for future research

- Research that helps to better understand how host communities and IDPs/refugees relate historically (recurrent displacement patterns, kinship and trade relations but at times also conflict) and how they share resources and assets in different locations.
- Research that explores innovative methods of targeting and verification that better account for the complex and dynamic nature of displacement movements and the multi-location and mutable kinship networks of IDPs and refugees.
- Research that considers the role of formal and informal processes in establishing and enforcing accountability, within the state as well as within and between communities.

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Introduction and Background: Social security mechanisms, aid and conflict

It is widely accepted that aid programmes designed to support recovery and resilience should enhance local coping capacities. In South Sudan, local social support mechanisms are intrinsic to those coping capacities. At the same time, aid actors try to counter practices they associate with misuse and diversion of aid. However, many international actors do not recognise how coping capacities and “diversion” are related, and spring from some of the same social forces.

Kinship and community support-based social security mechanisms are vital for the survival of South Sudanese in times of crisis. They are based on concepts and longstanding practices of mutual support, social obligation and vulnerability. These concepts can conflict with western ideals of transparency, accountability and “fair” allocation of resources, including aid. As a result, socially and culturally important coping strategies can be difficult to reconcile with international aid guidelines, values and policies. They can also be seen as undermining aid agencies’ commitment to humanitarian principles. Tensions and dilemmas emerging from these partly incompatible value systems, or this “clash of civilisations”, are particularly evident when NGO staff engage with local authorities and community members. These tensions can pose significant pressures and even risks to aid workers; particularly local staff.

This report aims at enhancing donors’ and aid workers’ understanding of the dilemmas, tensions and conflicting goals that emerge when international guidelines, policies and humanitarian principles meet the reality on the ground. Linked to that, the report aims to provide a) insights into local social security mechanisms prevalent in South Sudan and how they relate to external aid; b) local perceptions of what is and is not socially acceptable in terms of influencing and diverting aid; and c) a deeper understanding of the dilemmas, challenges and risks international and South Sudanese aid workers face in relation to social support mechanisms and aid, and how they respond to these challenges.

This report is based on 43 interviews that were conducted in Juba, Torit and Akobo in July and August 2018.¹ The researchers interviewed international and South Sudanese staff of international and South Sudanese NGOs and UN agencies, donors, academics, experts, South Sudanese authorities, church leaders and some beneficiaries. Moreover, the report draws on previous CSRF research on aid in former Northern Bahr el-Ghazal (NBeG).²

Social support mechanisms in South Sudan

In South Sudan, social support mechanisms are of key importance for people to survive in times of crisis. Norms and practices related to social support mechanisms differ from context to context. Social support mechanisms have been studied in detail, for instance by Harragin and Chol (1999), while Maxwell and Burns (2008) have examined the same specifically in relation to aid. Social and spiritual norms oblige South Sudanese to share resources and to support others in times of crisis, particularly their close blood relatives. The closer the kinship ties, the stronger the obligation of mutual support. Resources are, however, also shared with more distantly-related kin, neighbours, unrelated community members and with strangers in need. However, while support to relatives is long-term, support to unrelated persons is often for a more limited period.

Relatives share different resources and assets. In rural areas of South Sudan, family ties obligate the sharing of arable land, sorghum, shelter, protection, labour, meat, game, tools and the provision of support in the form of advice and counselling. Communities engaging in pastoralism share pasture and livestock. They also support each other in the form of contributions to bride wealth and blood compensation. When it comes to

¹ The two case study areas Torit and Akobo were selected based on different criteria: As CSRF research aims at covering different regions of South Sudan and CSRF had not yet conducted research in former Eastern Equatoria and former Jonglei states, it therefore decided cover these states. In interviews in Juba the support to and targeting of IDPs living with hosts emerged as an interesting topic. Akobo is one area in which hosts support IDPs with food and shelter.

² Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility 2017: Findings around conflict sensitivity and food aid in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal.

homicide judgments, close relatives of the convicted individual are obliged to contribute livestock for the blood compensation paid to the family of the victim. If a family lacks food – for example because of harvest failure – relatives are obliged to support them with sorghum or livestock. Assets associated with the market economy such as salary, cash, clothes, school fees and health services, and access to services and jobs are also associated with obligations of sharing and mutual support. Chiefs and clan heads are expected to provide for vulnerable community members. Either they support them with their own resources or – particularly when several families are affected – they mobilise support from community members who share sorghum and other forms of support including labour.

Contested sharing of resources

Despite strong social obligations, sharing resources and support is at times contested. While one individual may feel that he or she has a right in the share of a relative's asset or money,³ the respective relative may reject this claim as illegitimate. Different mechanisms exist to enforce the sharing of wealth and the provision of support. Persons who do not receive what they claim to be their share or right in support usually first try to talk to the relatives concerned. If this does not work, they might use social pressure by involving other relatives to persuade, or by publically condemning their kin. Singing negative or even insulting songs is another means to enforce support, but is considered a very strong form of condemnation in many communities and therefore typically used as a last resort. It tarnishes the reputation of the person concerned and will even lessen the person's and his/her children's chances to get married and to occupy a leadership position. Cursing and other spiritual sanctions through spiritual powers and ancestors are also associated with the rejection to share resources.

In Akobo, Torit and NBeG, chief courts settle disputes over the sharing of resources. In some areas, impoverished individuals can call upon chiefs to enforce support. In such 'hunger court' cases, chiefs then either demand better-off persons to support their poor relatives, or – in case the better off relatives refuse to help - remove assets such as livestock or sorghum and hand it over to those in need.⁴ Once those who had received support recover, they are obliged to pay back their debts. As hunger court cases are more common during times of food insecurity, they are also hoped to be a robust indicator for food shortages.

Social support mechanisms, aid and crisis

The same norms and obligations about sharing resources described above also apply to aid. In Akobo for instance, respondents noted that they shared food aid in the same way as they do home grown sorghum. Consequently, families share received food aid, but also cash and non-food items with persons in need including IDPs. Moreover, hosts provide land, shelter, other natural resources and protection to IDPs, refugees and returnees. In Akobo, some IDPs stay with relatives and friends, while others live with families whom they did not know prior to their displacement. Accordingly, support is also provided to "strangers," including to members of other ethnic groups.

Limitations of social support mechanisms and aid during crisis

Despite their importance, social support mechanisms have a number of limitations, particularly in the current economic and livelihood crisis. There are few resources left to be shared within kinship and social networks, which seriously undermines both the networks and the social strengths that are tied to them. In the current economic crisis, South Sudanese staff of NGOs, UN agencies and other international organisations are often the main breadwinners in extended families and communities.⁵ The scale of the livelihood crisis puts enormous pressure on them to share their resources with relatives and community members in need and to

³ The relation between livestock and cash is complex. Livestock is socially, politically and economically of great importance. Therefore, cattle keepers are often reluctant to sell livestock for cash and might ask relatives who receive a salary for cash instead of selling their livestock.

⁴ Luka Biong Deng (2010) described famine courts in Bahr el-Ghazal during the second civil war.

⁵ Before the onset of the current economic crisis when government salaries' purchasing power was much higher, government officials often supported their relatives. In the current crisis, they often struggle to take care of their own core families and cannot any longer assist other relatives.

favour them when it comes to aid and employment opportunities, regardless of the fact that those staff may have little or no influence over decisions about how and to whom aid is allocated and jobs offered.

Displacement places further strains on social networks, as families and communities are separated and accumulated social capital is lost. IDPs, refugees, and others with limited social capital may face challenges to enforce support and to access aid. Moreover, some host chiefs may prioritise the interests of their own communities over those of IDPs and refugees or marginalised community members who consequently face difficulties in accessing aid.

Contestation over aid and the politics of aid

Due to the severe humanitarian and economic crisis and the desperate situation of many South Sudanese, contestation and competition over resources is high and aid has become a key resource in South Sudan. The economic footprint of aid in South Sudan is large: While the approved 2017/2018 budget of the Government of the Republic of South Sudan was 299 million USD (Ministry of Finance and Planning 2017), the Humanitarian Response Plan received 1.2 billion USD in 2017 (South Sudan Humanitarian Fund 2017). Competition over aid emerges between different administrative entities when it comes to geographical targeting. At the same time, competition is also prevalent within communities between different local authorities⁶, clans, lineages and families. Under such circumstances, some chiefs and local authorities who have influence over aid allocation may try to benefit themselves and favour their own people at the expense of others.

Aid allocation is highly political. Authorities and political actors often try to capture or dominate aid. They do so in the interest of their communities, but some also for their own benefit. Local authorities are expected to support their communities, including by bringing food aid and services. If they fail to fulfill their community's expectations, their influence and authority is likely to decrease. The capacity to allocate aid confers influence, legitimacy and control over resources.⁷ Aid becomes particularly important in a time when local authorities have hardly any other resources to provide, including salaries.⁸ Some may use aid for self-interest and political motives to foster, for example, patronage networks and political power – despite claiming to act according to norms related to local support mechanisms.

Caught between two cultures: local social support mechanisms and western norms and policies

In this study, a number of key issues emerged that result from tensions between local social support mechanisms and aid policies based on western norms. The following sections discuss these issues and illustrate where conflicts emerge and how stakeholders respond to them.

1. Notions of fair and unfair sharing of aid

Sharing per se constitutes an important value in South Sudan. Yet, when sharing comes at the expense of others – and particularly those in need - respondents described it as an antisocial act. Accordingly, favouring kin, in-laws, friends and political allies in relation to public resources - including aid - is seen as illegitimate as it excludes those who are not well connected.

The concept of “eating alone” is also associated with misuse of public resources.⁹ Individuals accused of misuse of public resources - particularly at the community level - are likely to be challenged by community members

⁶ Between different individuals working in different sectors of the administration.

⁷ See for example: Duffield et al. (2000) and Maxwell et al. (2015).

⁸ Salaries are not paid regularly and have very little purchasing power. With the increase of the number of states and other administrative entities, the administration employed new staff members. They do not necessarily receive salaries.

⁹ Ownership over public resources is a complex issue in South Sudan. On one side, many South Sudanese perceive limited ownership over public resources. They also have limited possibilities to seek accountability over the misuse of public resources. At the same time, marginalization narratives in reference to public resources and public services were main factors of mobilization during the first and second civil war and a major source of grievances since 2005.

who feel disadvantaged by this practice. If the misuse is seen as serious, the accused persons might lose current and/or risk future leadership positions. Community leaders are expected to represent the interests of the whole community; not just their relatives.

While some individuals who engage in “unfair” allocation of aid might not care about the risk of reputational damage, others might be forced by circumstances to ignore such concerns. A church leader noted that some of the misuse of aid is born out of a desperate situation. Some respondents were sympathetic to impoverished persons who illegitimately appropriated small quantities of (food) aid out of need, whereas larger-scale diversion out of greed by individuals in power was perceived as unacceptable and antisocial. Yet, in cases of larger-scale diversion by powerful and well-connected individuals, community members have limited power to respond and to seek justice.

South Sudanese individuals working in the aid sector as well as government staff are often caught between conflicting interests: local norms-based expectations of their relatives and community members on one side, and of the larger community/constituency on the other. Whereas relatives might push for favours, the larger community is very likely to reject and challenge any favouritism. Unsurprisingly, individuals who feel excluded and marginalised by favouritism are more likely to complain about it, while those profiting are unlikely to challenge it. Consequently, views about what is right and what is wrong also depend on the situation and the perspective.

In this study, respondents seldom used the term corruption, but rather referred to less ‘loaded’ terms such as “misuse”. South Sudanese respondents often described concrete examples and actual practices which they considered illegitimate or unfair. Meanwhile, expatriate respondents considered diversion an organised and systematic attempt to divert aid. As such, sharing or reallocation of food aid according to local norms and support mechanisms was not considered diversion by most, nor problematic per se. Conversely, they considered large-scale looting, large-scale diversion and channelling of aid to armed actors particularly problematic as it potentially feeds the conflict.

“Eating alone”: antisocial behavior and its consequences

Individuals who do not share resources with relatives are referred to as selfish and antisocial and are associated with the act of “eating alone.” Persons accused of “eating alone” might face the threat of social isolation. This entails loss of access to resources (including bride wealth), support including protection from relatives and reduced chances to get married or to fill any leadership position in the future. In South Sudan where kinship networks are of pivotal social, economic, political and security importance, social isolation has serious long-term consequences. Accordingly, the “eating alone” narrative attempts to force individuals to share resources and to support those in need.

2. Divergent views on vulnerability and targeting

South Sudanese and western concepts of vulnerability and targeting sometimes differ considerably.¹⁰ South Sudanese definitions tend to focus on locally relevant factors such as social and economic background, with key indicators including lack of social relations, livestock and assets, as well as limited ability to access different coping mechanisms.¹¹ Moreover, South Sudanese tend to consider vulnerability at the household level, whereas external actors often focus on the individual. Meanwhile, external actors tend to emphasise less contextualised and more individualised factors such as malnutrition levels, age, gender, disability and displacement status. However, there is increasing recognition that access to social support mechanisms and social capital are key indicators of vulnerability.

This means that NGOs, local authorities and communities do not always agree on who the most vulnerable persons are. Tensions over targeting can lead to disruption and violence – particularly as needs rise to the

¹⁰ Maxwell and Burns (2008) extensively discussed targeting and diversion.

¹¹ See for example: Harragin and Chol (1999).

point where the majority of the country is severely food insecure.¹² Respondents referred to different examples where community members either disrupted targeting exercises, looted food aid, or attacked agency staff. For instance, in Eastern Equatoria youth forced UN staff to abandon food aid distribution and took charge of the food aid allocation.¹³ In some contexts, tensions emerged over the targeting of IDPs. In one example shared, leaders demanded that hosts should also receive aid. They stressed not only that hosts had been supporting IDPs for several months, but that some hosts were as vulnerable as IDPs. In other cases, local authorities have rejected targeted aid altogether, insisting on equality (either everybody gets support or nobody gets support). In such cases, NGOs face the dilemma of respecting a culture of equality while responding in line with an equity-based interpretation of impartiality, as reflected by current targeting practices.

Different aid allocation mechanisms

Particularly in the past, chiefs distributed aid to beneficiaries. The most senior chiefs handed food aid over to junior chiefs who then distributed food to individual households.¹⁴ Chiefs often allocated food aid according to local notions of sharing. Regularly, they distributed food aid equally to all junior chiefs and their communities. Accordingly, everybody received some food aid. South Sudanese respondents generally described this approach, which emphasises the equality of food aid allocation, as fair.¹⁵ In other cases, particularly when only very limited amounts of targeted food aid were available, chiefs decided to allocate food aid only to vulnerable households identified by headmen.¹⁶ This approach sought to channel limited resources to the few households most in need. Chiefs still play a role in aid allocation in South Sudan, albeit not to the extent that they used to. In some areas they are consulted in targeting processes, while in others they still allocate aid. As needs rise and resources reduce, chiefs are increasingly challenged by their communities in this role – by those missed out and in terms of the ability to allocate aid fairly.

In some areas like Akobo, international and local NGOs play the leading role in the distribution of aid, including food aid. Both approaches (working through chiefs and working through NGOs) have strengths and weaknesses. Working with chiefs helps to ensure the response is based on local notions of vulnerability, targeting and sharing of resources, and thus adapted to the contextual realities on the ground. Yet, some local officials or chiefs might be driven by self-interest, and favour or exclude certain groups.¹⁷ Because NGOs and their staff are less likely to be part of the social fabric than chiefs, by taking charge of allocation, they can counter exclusion and marginalisation of some groups or individuals.

There is, of course, a middle ground. In locations where NGOs distribute aid, many cooperate with chiefs and other local authorities, sharing information about aid resources and planned activities, and discussing among other things the targeting criteria. In such situations, chiefs – who know the situation of their communities well - help aid actors identify vulnerable persons. In different contexts, chiefs compile or are involved in the compilation of beneficiary lists. Well-trained and experienced local staff members of national and international NGOs play a crucial role in engaging with local authorities. Knowing the context, the local authorities and local norms well, they are well-placed to negotiate with chiefs and local authorities, and to

¹² According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, nearly 60% of the country's population was severely food insecure during the July – August 2018 lean season. For more, see 'Key IPC Findings: September 2018 – March 2019', https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/South_Sudan_IPC_Analysis_Key_Messages_-_28_September_2018.pdf

¹³ Members of the governing age-set (*Monyimiji*) attacked and beat UN staff. The youth did not accept that only some vulnerable individuals received aid, while others were left out. The UN staff was forced to abandon their work and the *Monyimiji* took charge of the food aid distribution.

¹⁴ In South Sudan, the most senior chiefs are paramount chiefs followed in some areas by head chiefs and in other areas by executive chiefs. The executive chiefs head sub-chiefs, while the most junior chiefs are the headmen.

¹⁵ Albeit one female respondent in Akobo rejected this approach noting that due to this approach, each family had only received very little food aid in the past. She preferred the current system, which considers the size of each household.

¹⁶ Headmen are the lowest strata of chiefs in South Sudan.

¹⁷ Harragin and Chol (1999) stressed that community members could hold chiefs accountable. However, not everybody can confront powerful chiefs. For marginalized individuals and IDPs who are not well connected it is difficult to challenge chiefs.

mediate and reconcile local norms and needs with the guidelines and resources of NGOs and donors. Moreover, they can respond to potential biases and favouritism of local authorities.

In some cases, chiefs re-allocate food aid after the distribution. They do so for example by collecting food aid then re-allocating it to also include families who have missed out on registration and/or the distribution. More often, for instance in Akobo, beneficiaries share food aid and other forms of aid with others in their community. Both approaches are in line with norms related to social support mechanisms.

Unexpected consequences of sharing and reallocating resources

The sharing of aid with relatives or the reallocation of aid by chiefs is often in conflict with targeting principles of international aid. With targeted aid, aid organisations seek to enhance the food security, economic situation and nutrition level of specific individuals or families who are particularly in need. Sharing and reallocating aid on an equal basis tends to counteract these aims.

For example, NGO staff face dilemmas with nutrition supplements for severely malnourished children being shared across households. From a nutrition perspective, targeted children require the allocated dosage to recover. Yet, based on the value of sharing food within the family, nutrition supplements may be reallocated in households. Respondents working in this sector suggested that data should be collected to better understand the reasons for reallocating nutrition supplements and (chronic) severe malnutrition, and to train mothers about good practices in child feeding. Moreover, they stressed the importance of providing more sustainable, longer-term support that helps families to improve their food security.

In South Sudan, host communities often support IDPs and refugees before aid arrives. By assisting others, based on social support mechanisms, hosts in Akobo depleted their own resources, including food aid. Once IDPs and refugees receive humanitarian aid, they are expected to share with the hosts as well. This sharing of resources corresponds with local norms but is in conflict with aid principles and objectives, which typically target on an individual basis.

In cash transfer projects, sharing of aid actually affects project outcomes. With cash transfers, donors and implementing partners aim among other things to bridge humanitarian aid and longer-term support. In relation to this, they expect beneficiaries to invest cash for example in a shop, in education, or in seeds and in tools. However, as people often share what they receive in South Sudan, cash does not last long. From a South Sudanese perspective, this is not a failure: people assist others and thereby invest in their social relations and thus social capital. By supporting others now, they will be better placed to access support through their networks (should they need it) later. They may also be repaying older debts. Hence, as an NGO employee working in the cash sector explained, cash transfers still work in South Sudan, but they work differently.

Despite at times undermining progress towards aid objectives, it is difficult to halt the sharing of aid because sharing of resources is deeply ingrained in society and aid actors are not in a position to prevent it in practice. A South Sudanese NGO staff member explained: "If you say do not share, people will think that you are crazy. That this is a *Kawaja* [foreigner, Western] thing. Food is a connector that connects people through sharing. However, if food aid is not shared, it becomes a divider."

Recommendations

- Enhance efforts to better understand socio-political structures and social support mechanisms and the strengths and limitations of the latter in a given area
- Based on the analysis of local support mechanisms, support these mechanisms and avoid doing harm
- Improve insights and ongoing analysis of the political economy of aid in a given context
- Inform local authorities and communities about planned activities, amount of aid available and targeting criteria

Recommendations continued

- Adapt notions and criteria of vulnerability and targeting to local contexts, including socio-cultural, political and economic realities, by working with local staff of NGOs and local NGOs and by involving chiefs and other key local stakeholders
- Recognise that current aid approaches primarily target individuals in what is ultimately a sharing society, and explore ways to incorporate more contextually relevant indicators into targeting criteria
- Work through local partners to develop relations with local authorities and communities, take into account local structures and try to understand the impact of project activities in a specific context
- Donors should be flexible to allow targeting to be adapted to the local context and dynamics (for example, arrival of IDPs)
- Increase understanding of host/IDP relations and support. Assess support to hosts to compensate their assistance to IDPs to enhance hosts' coping mechanisms.

3. "To bring what people expect":¹⁸ Local participation versus local interference

Aid workers closely engaging with local authorities and communities repeatedly face situations where local participation turns into perceived local interference with aid processes, which can contradict international principles of aid. This can lead to (further) tensions and conflict between aid workers on one side and local authorities and communities on the other.

Local authorities, including chiefs and community members, have different motives to influence aid processes. In practice, it is difficult to know these motives, and how they might overlap. One important motive, which is in line with the topic of this study, are norms related to social support mechanisms: some authorities and community members try to shape aid to fit them. Some aim to support their own relatives and friends, while others try to benefit economically and politically, or to secure or consolidate leadership positions. Local authorities are under particularly heavy pressure from their own families and constituency to meet their needs and expectations. Those who fail might lose their positions. Thus, they have to find a balance between the values, needs and expectations of their communities and guidelines of the aid sector. This often puts local authorities at odds with principles of international aid and with employees of the aid sector.

In interviews, beneficiaries, NGO staff, donors and local authorities highlighted a number of examples of contestations over and attempts to influence and misuse aid. In the following paragraphs, some such examples as well as related motives and responses of the aid sector are explored.

Inflation of the numbers of beneficiaries

International and South Sudanese respondents working for NGOs observed that some local authorities inflated numbers of beneficiaries. In some cases, local authorities supposedly increased the number of beneficiaries as a bargaining tactic vis-à-vis aid actors to ensure that they received aid, for example to distribute to all community members according to ideals of fair sharing. Local authorities and chiefs represent the interests of their communities and face their currently high needs and expectations. If local authorities such as chiefs fail to deliver what people expect, they are likely to be challenged or might even lose their positions. At the same time, they are confronted with limited aid resources. Thus, local authorities including chiefs have to navigate between the realities and resources of international aid and the expectations of their communities.

¹⁸ Reference to Mawson's (1991) publication "Bringing What People Want" where he illustrates that spiritual authorities - like government authorities - lose influence and power in case they do not fulfill people's expectations.

Some local authorities including chiefs allegedly also increase numbers because they tax beneficiaries or distribute extra items to family members, friends and other people whose support they want to secure. A South Sudanese employee of an NGO explained: “You need resources so that people respect you, so that they come close to you. When you have a distribution going on, you have lots of food you can give to people whom you can otherwise not control. Food aid is also used to establish power.” NGOs and humanitarian agencies conduct different types of assessments to determine the numbers of beneficiaries and to minimise the inflation of numbers. Interviewed NGO staff collect data according to different methods and then compare and triangulate information from the different sources. Biometric registration is expected to fundamentally alter many of the existing ways for communities and individuals to adapt targeting and allocation exercises to their local contexts, likely removing both opportunities for misuse of aid and also for locally-appropriate sharing and redistribution.

In one location, local authorities claimed that a large number of IDPs lived with hosts. The number of people in need which the local authorities insisted on was unrealistically high and therefore – several NGO employees explained - created suspicion, ultimately leading to a loss of credibility among NGOs and donors. NGO employees were worried that due to this loss of trust in the local authorities, it could become more difficult in the future to get funding for aid in that area.

Manipulation of targeting and registration

In several interviews, local authorities including chiefs and local staff of NGOs were accused of having manipulated targeting and registration processes at the expense of vulnerable persons. In one area, a South Sudanese employee of an NGO suggested that local authorities registered goat names on beneficiary lists. Relatives and friends of the respective officials then collected the food aid for the ration cards registered under goat names. In another location, a local official demanded to be included in the distribution list and threatened to refuse to cooperate with the NGO if they did not give in.

Due to the economic crisis, the social fabric is eroding and local authorities, including chiefs in some cases, are increasingly favouring their own relatives. Some local authorities directly benefit from the manipulation of registration because individuals who are not considered vulnerable but are registered as beneficiaries often have to give part of the aid they receive to the chiefs and other authorities involved in registration. At times, powerful individuals or groups force chiefs and other authorities under threat of physical harm to register their relatives.

Registrations of IDPs at times involves manipulation. In one area, the hosts who had already been registered allegedly tried to re-register as IDPs. In another location, when an international organisation was registering IDPs who had been displaced from rural areas to a location next to a town, some people from the town also came to register. Staff of the international organisation allegedly assumed that this was an indication of fraud. However, there might be another reason: after fleeing their home areas, they may have lived with relatives in town and hence came to the location to register as IDPs. The two examples about the registration of IDPs illustrate that it is important to verify and crosscheck information. Indeed, NGOs counter attempts of manipulation of targeting and registration with different verification mechanisms. This includes crosschecking beneficiary lists with other sources of information and verifying them at public meetings. Another verification mechanism is to visit households to verify their vulnerability status and to check whether vulnerable households are actually registered. It is also important to consider the dynamic and complex nature of displacement movements, which are shaped by different factors such as security, social networks and access to services. Are the current targeting and verification mechanisms adequate to take these complexities and dynamics into account? If not, how could they be better adapted to the realities of displacement and the highly dynamic family networks of IDPs?

Illegitimate capture of aid

Respondents referred to a number of examples of alleged illegitimate capture of aid. In one case, a South Sudanese staff of an NGO narrated that beneficiaries who had received five goats from a restocking project were pressured to give two goats to chiefs and community leaders. In different areas, authorities taxed beneficiaries on food aid, cash, and on nonfood items including fishing tools. NGO staff members explained that they used certain mechanisms to receive feedback from community members to counter potential capture of aid. These include a complaints and information 'desk' in each site where food, cash or non-food items are distributed. Through post-distribution monitoring and feedback mechanisms, beneficiaries can share their grievances and NGOs can then follow up. However, the process of collecting feedback and providing responses often remains slow, posing challenges to real-time programme adaptations in response. Besides this, NGO staff receive feedback through informal encounters with authorities and community members. This provides insights into the local dynamics, people's needs, and their perceptions of aid. Songs about aid constitute a culturally more appropriate feedback mechanism at least in some areas of South Sudan: in the 1990s in Akobo, when a local employee of an aid agency was accused of selling food aid and distributing it to his own people, frustrated community members composed a song about him. Yet aid agencies rarely capture feedback provided through such undesigned channels.

Accusations about capture of aid can be caused by lack of information about targeting processes. Due to the opaque nature of targeting processes, beneficiaries might perceive targeting as unfair, or link it to an intentional misuse of aid, even if no actual misuse takes place, an expatriate scholar suggested. In one example, an NGO distributed tokens to households targeted by a restocking project. Allegedly, the beneficiaries expected three goats per token. When they only received two goats, some of them accused local authorities of having diverted goats. In this case, lack of information presumably fostered expectations and suspicion when they were not met. When aid does not meet expectations, beneficiaries may accuse local authorities or local staff of NGOs of having diverted aid. This underlines the importance of providing adequate information about the amount of aid beneficiaries will receive. Adequate information helps local authorities and NGO staff to manage expectations, prevents wrongful accusations, and allows communities to hold the respective stakeholders accountable.

Information gatekeepers

Focusing on chiefs and other local authorities as main gatekeepers and aid 'brokers' provides them with influence. Some might use this power to censor and adapt the information they share with communities for their own purposes.

Influencing recruitment processes

The aid sector is an important and popular employer for South Sudanese because it pays salaries with actual purchasing power and is one of few remaining reliable sources of income in the country. Therefore, the hiring of South Sudanese staff for the aid sector is a contested field. Attempts to interfere occur at different levels. Local authorities and communities try to influence the selection of new staff members. This has included attempts to fill in new positions themselves, and demands to receive the applications and to short list the candidates on behalf of the NGOs. Other authorities insist on selecting candidates or tell NGOs to hire specific candidates or reject the selected candidates.

Due to exertion of such influence, NGOs sometimes face difficulties in hiring qualified staff members. In one location, an NGO planned to hire a medical doctor. The local authorities insisted that the new staff member had to originate from the respective location, despite the fact that no qualified medical doctor was available within that community. In this case, the hiring of a local staff member was at the detriment of the quality of the health services.

Local authorities tend to push for candidates originating from their respective locations – even if these candidates are not qualified. In interviews, several motives emerged. First, officials attempt to assist relatives and friends to get jobs. In one location, youth spread the rumour that a prominent official tried to influence

NGOs to employ his own kin, in-laws and friends. Second, officials support employment for community members. Community members expect and pressure authorities to secure employment for locals, particularly during times of economic crisis. In addition, local authorities are likely to push for local job seekers because their salaries will benefit their families and the larger community. In some cases, chiefs support candidates whose families are affected by a livelihood crisis and expect that the salaries will help the families to improve their situation. While NGOs try to minimise illegitimate influence by local authorities and community members, South Sudanese and international NGO employees underlined the importance of trying to understand the motives of local authorities and to acknowledge the pressures they face. The failure to address hiring grievances reportedly led to attacks on NGOs staff and property in Maban in 2018.

Human resource (HR) staff and other NGO employees refer to NGO guidelines and HR procedures when engaging and negotiating with local authorities and community members in relation to recruitment processes. Some NGOs that rejected illegitimate interference faced pressure and threats from authorities that they would shut down their activities in the respective area. In other locations, NGOs received threats that the security of newly hired staff was “not guaranteed.” NGOs have to consider relations between new staff members and local authorities. If local authorities reject or threaten a new staff member, this might pose a risk to the new employee and the NGO.

International and South Sudanese NGO employees stressed the importance of jointly resisting illegitimate attempts to influence by authorities and communities, and of conducting coordinated negotiations with the respective authorities. Coordinated action is important because if one NGO gives in in one specific area, the local authorities will then try to enforce the same practice with all other NGOs as well, several respondents argued. There is a lack of clarity among NGOs, donors and UN coordination structures around who is responsible for leading collective efforts.

Influencing geographical targeting

In several cases, local authorities and NGO staff supposedly influenced the selection of project sites, e.g. through bringing boreholes to their home area, thereby sidelining other communities. When local authorities and communities try to influence geographical targeting in their favour, NGO staff respond by informing them about humanitarian principles, NGO guidelines and principles of accountability. A local employee of an INGO recalled that some communities refused to cooperate and even did not allow an NGO to work in their area, if this NGO insisted on following these principles.

Suspicious that local authorities and local staff of NGOs influence geographical targeting seem to be prevalent. Respondents suggested that members of communities that were not considered in a specific selection process, often automatically assumed that they had been left out because of South Sudanese staff of NGOs or local authorities who favoured their own people. They often do not consider that they might not have been selected because of targeting related aspects. In one example, a project only had funding to hire employees in an urban context. Some of the employees felt that the project marginalised rural areas. Yet, it was the limited resources which forced the NGO to focus on a town. Priorities for geographical targeting are often set based on terms of resources and are not shared, nor is adequate information about the selection and targeting process provided, an international respondent elaborated. He added that blind spots related to targeting also exist within organisations, and that NGOs are not necessarily able to backtrack targeting decisions.

Aid misuse narratives and suspicion

Suspicion and rumours about interference with and misuse of aid are widespread at the community level. South Sudanese and expatriate respondents suggested that aid diversion at the community level was likely not as widespread as rumours indicate. Different phenomena foster diversion narratives and suspicion:

- Dire economic and food security situation resulting in high needs among communities, high expectations of local authorities and beneficiaries, but at the same time increasingly scarce aid resources

Aid misuse narratives and suspicion continued

- Contestation and competition over aid between and within communities
- Social support mechanisms a) feeding expectations of favouritism and b) fears that others are favoured
- Differing views and perspectives about vulnerability and targeting and fair/unfair aid allocation
- Bargaining tactics of local stakeholders vis-à-vis aid actors (e.g. by inflating the number of beneficiaries)
- Disconnect between opaque and distant nature of large UN agencies and INGOs (for South Sudanese) and lack of understanding of local socio-political structures and support mechanisms (for expatriates)
- Lack of information about targeting processes (geographical and individual), budget allocation, budget constraints and changes in food rations

Perceived and real favouritism of certain villages, communities or even ethnic groups in relation to public resources including aid fosters grievances around exclusion and marginalisation. Political, social and economic marginalisation constitute long-standing grievances in South Sudan, and they were major factors in mobilising South Sudanese to fight the Government of Sudan in the first (1955-1972) and the second civil war (1983-2005). Hence, marginalisation narratives are powerful in South Sudan, and can still easily mobilise people to take up arms in ongoing conflicts.

Recommendations

- Explain and share recruitment guidelines and HR procedures, but also understand the motives of local authorities and the pressures they face
- Jointly resist illegitimate attempts to influence aid processes
- Use different communication channels to provide aid related information to communities and build more community engagement into programmes, such as posters and leaflets with pictograms, and loudspeaker and radio announcements
- Aid agencies should complement existing complaint desks at distributions and post-distribution monitoring with more informal feedback mechanisms
- Explore ways to improve efficiency of feedback mechanisms to ensure provision of timely and adequate responses to community feedback and complaints
- Identify other culturally appropriate feedback mechanisms such as songs about aid, and ensure that they are captured within Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning frameworks
- Support CSOs, church and traditional leaders to create awareness about social sanctions and norms
- Provide civic education about aid, responsibilities of government and aid actors, and the rights of beneficiaries
- Employ well-equipped and experienced staff with skills to handle misuse of aid challenges
- Consider targeting and verification mechanisms that take the complex dynamics of displacement into account
- Counter rumours of malpractice in geographical targeting by providing more information.
- Involve different stakeholders in targeting exercises to counter attempts of influencing.
- Despite higher costs and challenges in logistics, conduct needs assessments in remote areas to ensure that they are also considered.

4. Caught between two cultures: Risks for aid workers

UN organisations, international NGOs, and some national NGOs have policies, guidelines and procedures in place that address misuse of aid, fraud and corruption. In South Sudan as in other conflict affected and fragile contexts, it is at times a challenge to connect such policies, guidelines and procedures with the reality and

norms on the ground. On the positive side, NGO staff reconcile the different realities at various levels. This provides flexibility and allows project activities to be adapted to the context. On the negative side, tensions emerge at the intersection of local support mechanisms and international norms and policies. In particular, NGO staff in the field who closely engage with local authorities and communities have to navigate these different realities and norms. As such, these NGO staff face different challenges and risks.

Some aid policies that aim to counter misuse of aid are not appropriate to the context. As several respondents stressed, some donor requirements around procurement regulations are impractical and make project implementation difficult and in some cases almost impossible. One national NGO faced serious challenges with the procurement guidelines of one international partner organisation. Their partner demanded that each receipt should include a reference and copy of the ID of the recipient. These guidelines hampered the implementation of project activities; just to buy soda and water for a workshop turned into a major challenge. Many shop holders did not have ID cards. Those who had ID cards were (particularly in areas with high political tensions) highly reluctant to share copies of their IDs with sensitive information for a simple transaction. This calls for scrutiny of aid policies that do not fit to the context and unnecessarily hamper, complicate and challenge project implementation.

Balanced relations

In South Sudan relationships are highly valued and important. Keeping distance and refraining from establishing relations with authorities and communities is therefore difficult and is likely to negatively impact on project implementation.

Finding a good balance between distance and closeness/proximity can be a challenge for NGO staff in the field, a South Sudanese employee of an INGO noted. The respondent advised: "It is important to keep a good balance. One has to refer to the principles and guidelines as basis for relations. Meet to drink a coffee but show the boundaries of that relationship."

South Sudanese NGO employees working in their home areas are particularly likely to get caught between norms related to social support mechanisms with high expectations of relatives on one side, and international guidelines and principles of accountability on the other. Working in their home areas, they know the context, the authorities and the society, as well as the power and conflict dynamics. However, at the same time they are part of the community and expected to support their own people. Local staff at times struggle to keep the balance between being humanitarian actors and being members of the community. Some take a radical approach to this. An INGO staff said he's no willing to go and work in his own village.

Relatives, community members and local authorities mobilise social support mechanisms to claim support and favours from local staff of NGOs. Due to the current crisis and the desperate situation of many South Sudanese, relatives and friends expect local staff to put them on

beneficiary lists for food aid. Local employees of NGOs face many demands for support, but are often not able to assist all vulnerable relatives and friends with their salary. Overwhelmed by needs and expectations, some might succumb to the pressure; as one South Sudanese respondent explained: "Everybody will ask for aid. A lot will be on your shoulders. They will expect you to include relatives. And you might actually give in, just to get those relatives off your shoulders."

Local employees of NGOs who refuse to help are likely to face criticism and rejection. Relatives, community members and local authorities might accuse them of acting antisocially and threaten them with tarnishing their reputation and even with social isolation. Concerned local staff members commonly refer to humanitarian principles to convince relatives. However, their explanations are not necessarily accepted. An understanding that such decisions are taken by supervisors and are not the responsibility of the staff member can provide some measure of protection against family or community pressure. In line with the same social obligations, unrelated and more distant community members often suspect and accuse local staff of NGOs of favouring their own people. In times of severe humanitarian crisis, resources are limited and aid is further contested. The high expectations and widespread suspicion about misuse of aid and favouritism of community members mirror these contestations and also the severe crisis.

NGOs try to protect their local staff from demands of relatives and aid diversion accusations. In one case study area, one INGO conducted the registration and distribution of ration cards, while another INGO distributed the food aid. This approach aims to protect local NGO staff members from the accusation of having manipulated the registration and distribution of food aid.

Obligations of mutual support are also strong when it comes to recruitment in the NGO sector. The expectation is prevalent that job seekers are hired by relatives, irrespective of merits and qualification. Relatives, members of the same community and friends often request national staff to hire them. Whilst most NGO recruitment processes are managed according to professional standards, there are widespread perceptions that HR staff in some organisations are more likely to long or shortlist candidates from their own areas, leading to staffing compositions dominated by one group. In at least one organisation, staff members involved in recruitment processes have to sign a document in which they declare that they do not know the candidates. Making a false statement will have serious consequences, however, it is difficult for managers (particularly expatriates) to verify this independently. In some NGOs, South Sudanese staff responsible for recruitment are not deployed to their home areas. This counters pressure from local authorities and relatives and rumours about favouritism.

Local staff are also particularly vulnerable to pressure from local political and armed actors. Local authorities and armed actors in some cases demand NGOs to provide access to assets and resources such as vehicles, fuel and radio stations. In other contexts, local actors try to influence recruitment processes or disagree with NGO staff about targeting and other aid related issues. Rejecting such demands and attempts to influence is a significant risk for NGO staff located on the ground, and particularly for staff of national NGOs. While expatriates might be expelled, national staff might be threatened with coercion including arrest, beating or even death. An international INGO employee explained that: "As an international staff it is easier to say no. As a South Sudanese it is really difficult to say no to a military or to your uncle or clan member."

NGOs follow different approaches to mitigate risks. Besides referring to humanitarian principles and guidelines of the organisation, staff in the field often highlight that decisions were taken by more senior staff. In some INGOs, international staff or staff located in Juba take responsibility for sensitive decisions, and less positive messages are communicated from outside. Moreover, some NGOs bring in staff from other areas to engage in potentially sensitive issues such as tests in recruitment processes, dismissal of staff members, and extension or closure of programmes. At least one INGO provides introduction trainings for new staff in which new employees are also trained in difficult scenarios.

In most cases, national NGOs, particularly local NGOs (which have often emerged from the communities where they work) do not have the same resources available as international NGOs, and as such do not have the same negotiation power with authorities. As a result, they are more open to and affected by pressure and exertion of influence from local authorities and communities. They also do not have the same possibilities to protect their staff. Unlike international NGOs, local NGOs often do not have a higher management level and headquarters in Juba to refer to. When they abide to pressures from local authorities, local NGOs and their local staff can be directly affected by coercion.

Life after the end of the contract

South Sudanese NGO staff working in their home areas have to consider that they might remain with their community after the end of the contract with an NGO. A South Sudanese INGO staff member explained: "You have to protect yourselves. Authorities have the power to arrest and harass local staff. If you criticise the authorities, anything can happen to you particularly during time of crisis. The local authorities/communities can accuse you that you are denying them support, that you do not want them to get something."

South Sudanese NGOs and field staff carry a heavy share of the responsibility and risks that emerge when international norms and local values and realities meet and conflict on the ground. INGOs face similar risks but have more resources and negotiating power to mitigate these risks and to protect their staff. When transgressions of NGO guidelines and international principles come to light, it is often national staff and NNGOs who are held responsible. A recent report suggests “It is likely that local actors are more quickly criticised and even written off or blacklisted than they are lauded and applauded for their successes, while the shortcomings of international actors are downplayed” (Willitts-King et al. 2018: 5). However, because INGOs bear fiduciary risk for mistakes or misuse by their NNGO partners, any transgression is very likely to have implications on INGOs as well.

This calls for an honest discussion about the fact that a heavy share of risks and the responsibility of applying international norms and guidelines on the ground in South Sudan is transferred to field staff, local staff, NNGO and INGOs working at the local level. Moreover, with South Sudanese constituting the vast majority of aid workers killed since December 2013, the risks they face

are often different and worse than those faced by internationals. What are the consequences for national and international field staff and for NNGOs and INGOs? What are the consequences of this on the context and on conflict dynamics? Does this create tensions? For international staff members and donors, it is important to better understand the challenges and pressures that NNGOs and South Sudanese NGO employees face and the consequences of these pressures on them as they find a middle ground between being members of the community and being humanitarian actors. This will allow donors and managers to better protect staff and organisations from risk, be it fiduciary, social, reputational, security, or legal.

To pay or not to pay for “water”

It is South Sudanese staff of INGOs and NNGOs who most closely interact with local authorities, security forces and community members. At this level, South Sudanese staff may face demands that are in conflict with principles of international aid. South Sudanese NGO employees are obliged to follow NGO guidelines. At the same time, their employers and donors expect them to smoothly implement activities. NGO staff are often confronted with challenges when they try to reconcile these partly conflicting demands. For example, in Juba traffic, police regularly stop NGO cars and ask for money or for “water.”

Firstly, for some South Sudanese it is very difficult to refuse to give money for water. Based on social norms they feel obliged to assist individuals who ask for water. Secondly, if South Sudanese reject to pay, they are likely to lose time discussing with the traffic police, and might even end up in jail. Considering this, some South Sudanese NGO employees at times pay from their own pocket to save time and to facilitate processes. They do so as individuals rather than NGO staff. As a result, they tend not to report it, because it may be considered an act of bribery as per the NGO policies and guidelines. This constitutes a massive transfer (and individualisation) of risk.

Recommendations

- Train local authorities and NGO staff on humanitarian principles
- Role-play for new staff to train on difficult situations and to create space for discussion on how to deal with them
- Continue to engage with field staff on how to manage pressures from local authorities, community members and relatives
- Jointly discuss and reflect on risks, challenges and positive experiences of field missions
- Apply lessons learned from field staff into programme design by building formal space for this into the programme cycle
- Hold listening sessions with staff in field locations to get their feedback on disconnects between policies and the local context. Where possible and appropriate, adapt these policies to local contexts
- Establish ties with local authorities and communities but find a good balance between closeness/distance

Recommendations continued

- Improve understanding of the pressures South Sudanese staff and NNGOs are experiencing and the consequences of these pressures on them
- Introduce mechanisms and practices to protect local staff from exertion of influence and accusations of favouritism.

Conclusions

Social support mechanisms are intrinsic to coping strategies in South Sudan. As such, norms related to sharing strongly influence aid allocation, expectations and perceptions. However, sharing and reallocating aid based on local support mechanisms is often in conflict with international aid norms, guidelines and policies. This disconnect between these two value sets leads to tensions and conflicts when aid projects are implemented.

Decentralising analysis, design, oversight and management of activities is an important approach to ensure that aid better accounts for local realities. South Sudanese NGOs and international and South Sudanese field staff play a key role in implementing aid projects on the ground and adapting them to the context. They do this by negotiating with local authorities and communities and by reconciling local and international realities. However, they also carry a heavy share of the responsibility, the challenges and the risks that emerge when international norms and local values and realities meet on the ground. It is important to acknowledge and to respond to these challenges and risks by scrutinising and adapting inadequate aid policies and guidelines. A better understanding of the consequences of challenges for field staff and NGOs, and of the context and conflict dynamics will help to address challenges, to respond to risks and to find a balance. It would also equip aid agencies to better support their local partners and employees to negotiate a middle ground between their roles as community members and humanitarian actors.

Norms and practices related to sharing and social support mechanisms differ from area to area in South Sudan. Moreover, local governance structures and local political dynamics also vary considerably. Therefore, it is difficult and inappropriate to follow generic approaches and assumptions. Rather, it is important to consider the context, the stakeholders and the dynamics in each location.

Expatriate respondents generally felt that reallocation of food aid and other forms of aid according to local norms and support mechanisms is not problematic per se, unlike large-scale looting, large-scale diversion and channeling of aid to armed actors. Nevertheless, practices and narratives about misuse at the local level are important to consider because of different aspects. First, diversion narratives and suspicion about local level diversion influence intra-communal relations and also strain the relations between donors, NGO employees, local authorities and beneficiaries. Second, favouritism and misuse of aid at the local level excludes some community members, and often the most vulnerable. Third, the underlying norms (based on obligations of mutual support) that foster reallocation of aid and favouritism at the local level may overlap with norms or be used to legitimise large-scale diversion. Fourth, narratives about marginalisation and corruption are important means for divisive political mobilisation in South Sudan; often along ethnic lines.

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