

Rethinking Aid in Borderland Spaces

The case of Akobo

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Cover image: A scene in Akobo where UNMISS has a peacekeeping base since 2018 © UN Photo/
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Ethiopia-South Sudan borderlands



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Summary

In the Horn of Africa, there is a fundamental mismatch between the nation state framework through which bilateral and multilateral actors see the world, and the networked lives of often vulnerable populations in the region. This is most obvious at the margins of these states, where identities are fluid and decades of displacement and mobility have created extensive global networks beyond the control of state actors. Though movement and mobility, and to an extent the pathways used, are not new, the ability of the transnational to become integrated with everyday life in disparate locations is.

The transformative impact of everyday transnational linkages is particularly acute in politically and economically marginalized borderlands. These areas are historically subject to more extractive forms of government. Given their insecure locations, such areas traditionally have attracted predominantly emergency assistance. In particular, these borderland spaces have become central to refugee operations in the Horn of Africa, with national governments content for international resources to substitute for their own more proactive engagement.

An unintended consequence of this approach, however, has been to unmoor these territories further from the national sphere. Refugee programming has helped to internationalize them by creating incentives for transnationalism, whether to attend better schools over borders or by creating new migration routes to western countries that offer resettlement. This has created complex transnational resource flows through family and extended kinship networks, transforming remote border posts into nodes for flows of people, cash and social capital.

In these contexts, what are often perceived by outsiders as traditional and highly localized orders are actually interacting with the contemporary global economy and multiple cultural influences. The result can be a subversion of the usually unequal relationships between centre and periphery that not only challenges the spatial organization of state power but also the internal ordering of local societies.

If international actors are unaware of these dynamics, they are failing to understand a critical component of how individuals, families and communities are organizing themselves and surviving. Whether focused on fostering community resilience, tackling local conflicts or encouraging economic activity, there is a need to understand better the daily influence of transnational dynamics. There is also a risk of significant negative effects on local populations from interventions designed to reassert the control of the centre or harden state boundaries.

This suggests a need for further research into the role of the aid industry in transnational political economies, and the opportunities and pitfalls of donor engagement in borderlands. Such research requires new or adapted analytical frameworks that can both

investigate and describe complex networked systems. This entails, for example, asking questions about how changes in one location can impact on populations thousands of kilometres away. Such frameworks also need to foreground individual agency in order to move beyond the limited standard accounts of mobility that focus on push and pull factors.

Introduction

In recent years, one strand of political analysis argues that the most important schism in society in the twenty-first century is not between left and right or rich and poor. Instead, it is between those who are more open to complex, chaotic environments—partly created by mobility and modern telecommunications—which means that people and ideas circulate with ever greater rapidity; and those whose instinctive preference is to remain within the solidity and certainty of familiar closed loops.¹

An analogous division is currently built into the structure of the aid industry, which operates through a static and statist set of institutions but often—and seemingly unknowingly—in geographical locations that are at the forefront of complex transnational networks and flows.

These networks, and the resources that flow through them, are essential to how the populations in these often marginal locations maintain or build agency in the face of extractive central states and exploitative local state actors. They offer an escape from established orders, while also creating new structures of power, difference and inequality.

The divisions between the closed territorial order and the open transnational field are perhaps most obvious in borderland spaces. From both a programming and a policy perspective, however, the aid industry views and engages with such environments through a conventional centre–periphery lens that ignores this more complex political economy. Akobo, a small remote South Sudanese town situated on the Ethiopian border presents a revealing case study of everyday transnationalism, its modalities and impacts.

Despite—and, indeed, partly because of—the geographical remoteness of the location, the economic and political realities of life in Akobo encourage an existence that is deeply networked, far beyond the geographical confines of the town. These networks provide populations with opportunities to reach beyond the control of local political actors, making locations such as Akobo not just remote distribution posts but also critical nodes in complex transnational networks.

This analysis briefly examines the case of Akobo as both a borderland space and a transnational node. It then moves towards a wider discussion of traditional aid programming in peripheries, with particular reference to the assistance provided to refugee populations in the region. It ends by setting out a broad research agenda to help the aid industry better understand and programme for the everyday transnational realities of economically poor and politically marginalized regions.

¹ For example, see *The Economist*, 'Drawbridges up', Briefing, 30 July 2016. Accessed 12 March 2020. <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2016/07/30/drawbridges-up>.

It draws on qualitative research conducted in the Ethiopia–South Sudan borderlands between 2017 and 2019. The analysis also reflects a decade of experience on the part of the author working with the British government, including in South Sudan.

The case of Akobo

Life on the Ethiopia–South Sudan border

The town of Akobo, situated at the easternmost tip of South Sudan on its border with Ethiopia, feels isolated and cut off from the rest of the world. Gambella town in Ethiopia is the closest significant urban centre. It is, however, 200 km away. On the South Sudan side, the two nearest major towns—Bor and Malakal—are more than 230 km away (in different directions).

Transport from Akobo to these towns is severely challenging. On the South Sudan side, travel by car (on bad roads) is only feasible during the dry season. During the four to five-month rainy season, journeys must be made on foot or by boat. Access to Juba or Bor by aeroplane or helicopter during the rainy season is provided by the international aid operation in the region, with availability severely constrained. Travel to Gambella town is equally difficult, with access to reliable roads requiring either days of walking or boats that can only run when the water levels are high enough.

South Sudan’s recent civil war caused Akobo to become further isolated from the rest of the country. After a major security incident in December 2013, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) retreated to a compound by the airstrip and withdrew many of their personnel.² The town then came under the control of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army—in Opposition (SPLA-IO)—the main rebel group in South Sudan since December 2013—at the start of the war and has remained so since.

Being under SPLA-IO control has resulted in a reduction in traffic from areas controlled by the South Sudanese government and, more generally, in its connections to the national government in Juba. Early in the war, the mobile phone network serving Akobo was also cut off. This means that phone communication is reliant on access to one of the few wireless internet connections in the town, the majority of which are owned by international NGOs (INGOs), or the satellite phones or radios predominantly owned by senior political and military commanders. This consolidates power and influence in the hands of a small group of largely male gatekeepers, those privileged by their personal networks or educational background.

In Akobo, as in much of South Sudan, food sourced from markets, rather than subsistence production or humanitarian assistance, now dominates the calorific intake of the

2 Africa Renewal, ‘South Sudan: Security Council condemns killing of civilians, peacekeepers at UN compound’, United Nations, 20 December 2013. Accessed 12 March 2020, <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/news/south-sudan-security-council-condemns-killing-civilians-peacekeepers-un-compound>.

local population.³ To meet these needs, daily survival is primarily contingent on access to monetized resources. Due to the relative isolation of Akobo from the centralized economy of South Sudan, present day economic survival and advancement is therefore dependent on mobility and movement to gain monetized resources. While this resembles the necessity of mobility and movement to find grazing land and water for the cattle-based pastoral livelihoods of previous generations, it requires movements across far greater distances.

That is not to say that aid is insignificant to the population of Akobo. Indeed, as one of the few hubs available to the aid operation for the delivery of aid into rebel-held areas, there has been a significant expansion in the number of NGOs operating in town since 2013. In addition to the projects they deliver, the aid organizations operating in Akobo have stimulated the local economy with jobs, their demand for goods and services, and as an external supply of cash: one INGO estimates that they brought more than USD 50,000 in cash to Akobo per month to pay salaries.⁴

In an otherwise cash-constrained environment, this makes Akobo an important local economic hub, with resources flowing in and out of town. The relative proximity of the more dynamic and interconnected markets around Gambella town, where goods and services are more accessible than in South Sudan, has ensured this flow of resources has a strong cross-border dynamic. A steady flow of people—traders and ordinary citizens—move back and forth across the border, on foot or by boat, all part of this complex economic network.

Movement and mobility between the two Akobos

Akobo is by nature a liminal place, with both its history and present defined by its position on the border; indeed, it is comprised of Ethiopian and South Sudanese settlements on either side of the river Pibor. The Ethiopian settlement is known locally as Thiergul. Residents of the two Akobos and the wider area have generally been able to switch identity, citizenship or language, taking advantage of different circumstances and regulations on either side of the border on a temporary or permanent basis.

For example, there is a long history of populations in the area moving back and forth across the border in response to where the best schooling has been available.⁵ The primary school in Akobo has struggled to deliver education to its residents in recent decades, particularly during times of conflict. Consequently, many people have left to seek better quality schooling at higher grades in other locations. The decision on where to go was often based on a range of factors, including accessibility, family or kinship ties, and the

³ Eddie Thomas, *Moving Towards Markets: Cash, Commodification and Conflict in South Sudan*, London: Rift Valley Institute, June 2019.

⁴ Observations by the author, Akobo, June 2019.

⁵ Dereje Feyissa, 'Alternative Citizenship: the Nuer between Ethiopia and the Sudan', in *The Borderlands of South Sudan: Authority and Identity in Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, eds. Christopher Vaughan et al., New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

instructional language being used (with a general preference for English, in particular for accessing jobs with international organizations).⁶

The internationally supported refugee camps in Gambella, which have generally provided higher quality educational opportunities, presented an important opportunity to people in Akobo, with access enabled by the open door policy towards refugees in Ethiopia. From the camps, some have sought opportunities to further their education in Gambella town, or elsewhere in the relatively well-resourced tertiary education system in Ethiopia.

Enabled by their links to the significant population of Nuer speakers in Gambella, others have settled more permanently in the region, finding jobs or starting their own businesses. Some have subsequently returned to Akobo to compete for the well-paid INGO jobs there. A small number have moved further afield, either securing passage to regional capitals where more employment is available, such as Nairobi and Kampala, or obtaining places on international refugee resettlement programmes and moving to Australia, the US and Canada.⁷

These local flows of people have been directly affected by the policy decisions of politicians and administrators in places as far afield as Juba, Khartoum, Addis Ababa and outside the region. In late 2018 and early 2019, for example, when UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) decided to run a new biometric registration process in the camps in Ethiopia, this prompted a significant increase in travel through Akobo out of South Sudan as people sought to ensure they kept their refugee registrations up to date.⁸ This would ease their ability to live on the Ethiopian side of the border if they wished, and thus keep their options open while sustained peace in South Sudan remains in the balance.

Transnational networks, money and social capital

These transnational itineraries show that while remoteness may be seen as trapping people in a particular place, it can also act as a spur for people to move. Some of those who move lose touch with the family and friends that remain but those with resources are more able to stay in contact or even return to visit. This has meant that over the decades, Akobo has become a node for many far-reaching and complex transnational economic and social networks, a manifestation of growing social capital.

Despite the communications challenges that people in Akobo face, residents still find ways to maintain contact with relatives in Kampala, Minnesota and Melbourne, who in

⁶ Carver and Guok, *No-one can stay without someone*.

⁷ Freddie Carver and Duol Ruach Guok, *No-one can stay without someone: Transnational networks amongst the Nuer-speaking peoples of Gambella and South Sudan*, Rift Valley Institute: London, forthcoming.

⁸ 'Cross-Border Population Movement Factsheet: Akobo Port and Road Monitoring', ReliefWeb, May 2019. Accessed 12 March 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/reach_sdd_factsheet_akobo_prm_may_2019.pdf.

turn provide both moral and material support.⁹ At the heart of these networks remain the traditional institutions of Nuer society: the family, the *cieng* (most readily translated as ‘home’ or ‘the community of’, referring to both the wider kinship group to which an individual belongs, and its traditional territory), and the age-mate group (the group of people that go through initiation rites together). In many of the parts of the world where Nuer-speaking people have settled, community associations have been created around these institutions.¹⁰

The increasingly essential financial capital available to individuals to make improvements to their lives is therefore directly linked to the social capital represented by their particular networks of family, kin and other connections. For centuries, Nuer extended families have collectively resourced marriage dowries and other key elements of survival in South Sudan. At present, they use similar processes—though monetized and across much wider distances—to support the building blocks of independent life in the twenty-first century: the ability to move, finance an education, or buy a smartphone.

The growing importance of transnational and monetized social capital also creates new forms of difference among the population. Consequently, some communities living in the Akobo borderland space are better placed to leverage the opportunities created by the Ethiopia–South Sudan border than others. For example, the Gaajak sub-section of the Nuer-speaking peoples have been present on both sides of the border for longer than the Lou Nuer or other Jikany sub-sections,¹¹ and therefore have kinship networks that are more fully integrated with the Ethiopian state system.¹²

At present, having a relative or relatives in the US or Australia able to provide financial support may be the most critical factor in shaping inequality of opportunity at the local level. In general, these networks are critical to both individual status and future prospects. In the words of one Gambella resident, ‘No one can stay without someone.’¹³

The border as a political resource

The central state (and the services it is supposed to provide) has been to a large extent absent from daily life on either side of the border. The primary interest of the Ethiopian state in the area is stability. In particular, the state seeks to ensure that conflicts in Gambella, which periodically erupt into violence, do not worsen, especially given the instability across the border in South Sudan. State economic interests in maximizing the

9 Carver and Duol, *No-one can stay without someone*.

10 Similar phenomena among other South Sudanese communities are described in Eddie Thomas, ‘Community development in Obbo, Magwi County, Eastern Equatoria’, unpublished, 2015.

11 Social organization among Nuer-speaking peoples is generally described in terms of sections and sub-sections. The Jikany Nuer are the easternmost group and are divided into Gaajak, Gaajiok and Gaagwang.

12 Feyissa, ‘Alternative Citizenship’; Carver and Duol, *No one can stay without someone*.

13 Carver and Guok, *No-one can stay without someone*, 23.

output of the natural resources in Gambella, in particular uncultivated land,¹⁴ have had to come second to this primary objective.

More locally, the Gambella regional government has, by Ethiopian standards, relatively low capacity and therefore a limited ability to disburse state resources across the region. This has the effect of giving disproportionate significance to relatively small state interventions. For example, a new road being built between Tiergol and the trading post of Matar to the north, although a relatively small local project, has the potential to have a transformative impact on the area, given the potential to significantly cut travel times to Gambella town.

On the South Sudan side, services are generally delivered by non-state actors, primarily NGOs and UN agencies, with resources provided by international humanitarian organizations. For its part, the SPLA-IO (Sudan People's Liberation Army–In Opposition) has kept the Juba government at a distance, with its own generally less well resourced troops and administrators monitoring movement in and out of town.

Given this relative disengagement by the dominant national state actors, the border area becomes a space where local political stakeholders can wield significant influence and use the border itself as a political resource. For example, ever since the creation of the Gambella region in 1994 under the ethnic federalist model of Ethiopia, and the allocation of power to a large extent on the basis of demography, the flow of people across the border has been a critical political issue. Over the last three decades, there has been significant growth in Nuer-speaking peoples in the Gambella region, compared to Anuak speakers, who claim precedence as the original inhabitants of the region.¹⁵ Though demographic movement across the border is driven by individuals and communities seeking both security and opportunity, these shifts have also aligned with the interests of local politicians to strengthen their hand in the region.¹⁶

The growth in the number of Nuer speakers in Gambella has also worked to the benefit of the South Sudanese armed opposition, for whom they have been a core constituency since the civil war broke out in 2013. As in the past, when Gambella was a rear base for southern Sudanese rebels against rule from Khartoum, it has once again become something of a safe haven away from the direct control of the new political centre in Juba.¹⁷ In

¹⁴ See, for example, Human Rights Watch, 'Waiting Here for Death: Forced Displacement and Villagization in Ethiopia's Gambella Region', New York: Human Rights Watch, 16 January 2012.

¹⁵ The number of Nuer speakers resident in the Gambella region increased by 500 per cent between 1984 and 2007, while the increase of Anuak speakers occurred at half that rate; see: Carver and Duol *No-one can stay without someone*.

¹⁶ It is important to note that the movement of Nuer speakers in to the Gambella region has brought not only interethnic tensions but also tension among Nuer speakers themselves. See: Dereje Feyissa, 'Electoral Politics in the Nuer Cultural Context', in *Contested power in Ethiopia: traditional authorities and multi-party elections*, eds. Kjetil Tronvoll and Tobias Hagmann, Boston: Brill, 2011.

¹⁷ Regassa Beyissa, *War and Peace in the Sudan and its impact on Ethiopia, the case of Gambella: 1955–2008*, Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, 2010.

the interests of stability, the Ethiopian government allows the SPLM-IO to operate, albeit within tight constraints.

Aid interventions in borderlands: beyond the centre–periphery framework

Akobo and its surroundings emerge from this analysis as a complex field of constraint and opportunity at the margins of the state system. The primary currency in the region is social capital, particularly that which is created through far-reaching transnational networks. Through the ability of people to monetize social capital, it becomes a key driver for increasing opportunity—often through further mobility. The region thus becomes an accelerator of mobility, helping disperse populations widely across the globe. It is also an informal hub, acting as a crossroads for goods, money and people to come in and out of the region. The border acts as a site of arbitrage, with local political actors having the space to dominate how this is governed—as long as they deliver on the primary objectives of their political seniors. The question then is whether humanitarian and developmental interventions appropriately understand and engage with these complex dynamics.

Central to the challenge of programming in an increasingly transnational world is the bias inherent in the aid system towards national sovereignty, through organizations structured around country units and capital cities. While this may be an inevitable consequence of the existing international legal order, it makes the aid system poorly placed to understand and engage with power and communication structures that do not similarly organize themselves through national capitals. Inevitably, it means that aid is likely to be captured by national governments, or at the very least by the narratives that are perpetuated in national capitals.

In particular, those in national capitals tend to see borderlands through the lens of centre and periphery framings. This is the notion that resources and capacity tend to accrete towards the central parts of states, while far peripheries remain remote and underdeveloped. For those at the centre of these states, this is an attractive notion. It reinforces both their dominant centralizing political narratives, while implying the existence of a natural state of affairs that keeps the peripheries backwards beyond the decisions made by national actors.

In practice, the centre–periphery framing is crucial for reducing the agency of those who live in border areas—populations that have often been excluded from development. It seeks to define the lives of borderland people primarily in relation to that of the capital city rather than in their own right or on a regional basis. As is evident in the example of Akobo, this is a poor way to understand how people actually live their lives. In particular, it tends to blind international policy-makers to the complex transnational dynamics that are at play in this borderland.

Situating peripheries in a discourse of otherness means that ideas of conflict and underdevelopment are also built into international community engagement in these spaces.

Unsurprisingly, state peripheries have tended to be the prime locations of the major humanitarian operations in the region over the past 40 years, whether for drought relief, responses to conflict or the provision of aid to refugees. The last of these provides an interesting window into how these kinds of interventions interact with transnational dynamics.

Dealing with population movements in borderland spaces

Borderlands have long been home to the largest refugee camps in the region. Although to some degree a geographical inevitability, this is also a result of national government interests. The governments of refugee hosting countries generally have a strong interest in keeping refugees away from already crowded capital cities, where services are under strain and populations with grievances can cause problems. Keeping refugee camps in relatively remote locations, where state reach and capacity are limited, also has the advantage of reinforcing the need for international actors to take greater responsibility for service provision.

Refugees themselves also often prefer to remain close to their countries of origin, particularly where there are ethnic ties across the state boundary that allow for the kind of fluid identities seen on the South Sudan–Ethiopian borderlands. When the Ethiopian government recently sought to move South Sudanese refugees to Benishangul-Gumuz—in response to concerns by local political actors about the rate of population growth in Gambella—there was significant opposition from the refugees themselves.¹⁸ The importance of being embedded in a society where individuals have strong cultural ties cannot be underestimated.

One effect of these large refugee programmes is that they significantly skew the political economies of the borderland spaces in which they operate. This is exacerbated by the logic of humanitarian programmes, which tend to focus on individual targeting based on externally defined framings of need and vulnerability. This approach can cause problems in societies where mutual support networks are a crucial aspect of individual and community resilience, disrupting the ways that social capital is operating.¹⁹

This is made even more challenging by attempts to impose specific definitions of identity that are rooted in international norms based on conceptual abstractions. In Gambella, distinguishing between refugees, returnees, host communities and internally displaced people has long been a puzzle. Yet, it is at the heart of eligibility criteria for different kinds of aid. This creates a set of perverse incentives that local populations become adept at navigating. For example, in some instances there is evidence of parents ensuring that their

¹⁸ Carver et al., ‘Refugee and Host Community Context Analysis: Gambella Regional Report’, London: Overseas Development Institute, forthcoming.

¹⁹ See the long-standing debates in South Sudan and Somalia about the merits of targeting, and the dividing lines between the diversion or collective re-allocation of aid. See: Simon Harrigan and Chol Changath, ‘The Southern Sudan Vulnerability Study’, London: Save the Children, 1998; Alex Humphrey, Vaidehi Krishnan and Roxani Krystalli, ‘The Currency of Connections: Why local support systems are integral to helping people recover in South Sudan’, Washington, DC: Mercy Corps, January 2019.

children cross borders separately from them so that they qualify for status as unaccompanied minors and the additional aid packages this brings.²⁰

More recently, interest in borderlands has grown among those who seek to tackle transnational threats, particularly terrorism and migration. At the security focused end of the spectrum, there is a desire to tighten borders, strengthen the capacity of security actors to stop illegal border movements and crack down on people smuggling. These concerns tend to translate into a desire to increase the reach and control of the state, with the intention of keeping a closer watch on local populations (although this is often framed in the language of development and poverty reduction). There is little evidence, however, that development programming can reduce migration. Indeed, there is stronger evidence that in low-income countries developmental progress may actually increase migration flows.²¹

None of this externally funded activity seriously engages with or seeks to understand the agency of people living in the borderland and the complex networks within which everyday transnationalism operates. Where these dynamics are recognized or highlighted, they are often framed as evidence of illegal or corrupt activity, rather than being integral to the resilience of local populations. Moreover, failing to understand these dynamics means missing the subtleties of local political economies and increasing the risk of engaging in activities that empower those who wish to reduce the agency of local populations. Ultimately, this may make them more, rather than less, vulnerable to predation. For example, any drive to support hardening of the South Sudanese border (perhaps in response to migration concerns) that had the effect of reducing the informal flows of people and goods could have a significant negative impact on food security in the country.

20 Carver et al., 'Refugee and Host Community Context Analysis'.

21 For example, see: Michael Clemens and Hannah Postel, 'Can Development Assistance Deter Emigration?', Washington, DC and London: Center for Global Development, 12 February 2018. Accessed 12 March 2020, <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/can-development-assistance-deter-emigration>.

Conclusion

The current institutional set up of donors and other aid actors makes them particularly unsuited to operating in networked borderland environments. While such policymakers have started talking more about the networked world, they tend to see this primarily as being symbolized by technological trends in urban environments in capitals and provincial centres. They do not apply the idea of a networked world to peripheries and borderlands.

In fact, networks are just as fundamental, if not more so, to populations in remote locations such as Akobo. Individuals and extended families living in the town have become used to working with complex systems, where small changes thousands of miles away can have a significant local impact. These are networks that have always been there but their reach and scope is now far greater than it has ever been before.

Multilateral and bilateral donors, along with implementing agencies, spending billions of dollars a year trying to reduce conflict and poverty in remote areas need to improve their understanding of these underlying dynamics. The risks of unintended consequences are too great. These may include empowering local power brokers at the cost of ordinary citizens, inciting conflict among different groups or cutting off key livelihood strategies central to resilience and survival.

One example is the recent push to reorient how the refugee operation in Ethiopia operates, including for South Sudanese refugees in Gambella, as part of the wider policy dialogue related to the Global Compact on Refugees.²² It is widely believed among local populations in Gambella that this reorientation will bring greater freedoms and benefits to those with refugee status. Those with refugee status are disproportionately Nuer-speaking populations that are in many instances already the objects of resentment from Anuak-speaking communities. While these additional benefits are unlikely to materialize

²² The Global Compact on Refugees is an international framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing among UN member states. It acknowledges that sustainable solutions to refugee situations require international cooperation. The Global Compact on Refugees was signed on 17 December 2018 at the UN General Assembly, after two years of extensive consultations led by the UNHCR.

in the way that many envisage, this perception—enabled by poor communication from Addis Ababa—risks contributing to the significant tensions that exist in the region.²³

There is also the risk that a window of opportunity is missed in relation to those who have been displaced internationally as part of refugee resettlement programmes. These first generation migrants have a unique connection and engagement with their places of origin but it seems possible that this will fade with time as future generations become less connected. While not all the effects of this connection to countries of origin are positive, it may be critical to tap into the social capital that currently exists, before this first generation fades into the background.

Before a change in approach to international aid delivery is considered, frameworks need to be developed that enable greater understanding of the realities of everyday transnationalism. While the focus of this analysis has been on the Ethiopia–South Sudan borderlands, this is far from being unique in the region. Across the Horn of Africa, there are transnational borderland spaces that act as hubs for global communities, particularly around the boundaries of the two countries with the weakest central states, South Sudan and Somalia. Therefore, any new analytic frameworks that are developed should have applicability well beyond Akobo and Gambella.

Researching everyday transnationalism in borderland spaces

Three areas of research into the everyday transnationalism of border spaces need further development.

Taking a systems approach to understanding the impact of aid in a particular environment

This would involve removing all the external trappings of funding arrangements—objectives, programmes, partners and activities—and instead focusing on understanding them solely in terms of resourcing inputs and outputs. How is aid money coming into this location? Where is it going? Who is benefitting from it (and how)? Who is taking it out? Answering these questions would help develop a far clearer understanding of the political economy of most aid programmes than currently exists.

²³ There is a history of tensions in Gambella between and among different communities, with the refugee programme and the resources it brings to the region often involved in these tensions. In 2002, an attack on Ethiopian government employees working with refugees led to a significant outbreak of violence across the region. Dereje Feyissa, *Playing Different Games: The Paradox of Anywaa and Nuer Identification Strategies in the Gambella Region*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 'Targeting the Anuak: Human Rights Violations and Crimes against Humanity in Ethiopia's Gambella Region', 23 March 2005. In 2016, a car accident in one of the camps escalated significantly, affecting security in Gambella town. Most recently, in September 2019, two aid workers were killed by unknown attackers on their way to the one of the newer refugee camps. See George Obulutsa, 'Attackers kill two aid workers in western Ethiopia—aid group, UN', *Reuters*, 6 September 2019. Accessed 12 March 2020, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-ethiopia-violence/attackers-kill-two-aid-workers-in-western-ethiopia-aid-group-u-n-idUKKCN1VR0RZ>.

Developing a better understanding of the networks through which local life is mediated

Network mapping tools that allow for understanding of both the mechanisms through which networks operate and the impacts that they have in multiple locations should help understand where there are potential points of influence in relation to a wide range of donor objectives.²⁴

Progressing beyond standard understandings of how and why people move

In general, standard understanding of how and why people move tend to be rooted in fairly simplistic models of individuals and communities either choosing (migrating) or being forced (displaced) to relocate. In contrast, the evidence suggests that mobility choices—a mixture of intention, chance and circumstance—are far more complex than this.²⁵ If programmes are to avoid creating counterproductive incentives, or targeting the wrong people altogether, mobility choices need to be understood as complex. This is of contemporary concern in South Sudan, where debates are underway about appropriate responses to potential population movements if the peace process takes further root. More nuanced analysis, drawing on lessons from both the 1970s and 2000s, is required to understand likely future trends.

²⁴ The X-Border Local Research Network is developing bespoke methodologies and approaches that bring together relevant qualitative and quantitative data. See 'Understanding and visualising the transnational everyday: a x-border workshop', November 2019, <https://sway.office.com/eAQwfKLdikhQImPg?ref=Link>.

²⁵ See Carver and Guok, *No one can stay without someone*, 17-29.

Glossary of acronyms, words and phrases

INGO	international non-governmental organization
SPLA-IO	Sudan People’s Liberation Army–in Opposition
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan

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Taking the Ethiopia-South Sudan borderlands as a case study, *Rethinking Aid in Borderland Spaces* argues that the traditional modalities of the aid industry are not fit for purpose in a world where transnationalism is a daily reality for communities, even—perhaps even especially—in the most geographically remote locations. The transnational networks that shape much of daily life operate outside of the control of state actors, and understanding and engaging with them therefore requires an approach that does not rely exclusively on the state system. The report argues for an increase in research and focus on these networks to better inform aid interventions, part of the need for which is being addressed through the X-Border Local Research Network.
