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South Sudan, Conflict

South Sudan: Will the Youngest Thrive or Barely Survive?

Even though South Sudan is the world's youngest country, it has been embroiled in several wars over the last few decades. Due to the resultant persistent instability, South Sudan is now mired in a nationwide humanitarian crisis. Millions of people in South Sudan have been killed or displaced from their homes, and nearly 60% of the population face acute food insecurity ("Monitoring food security" 20). To combat the food crisis in South Sudan, an action plan should be implemented across local to international levels. Solutions as part of this action plan include expanding the area of cultivated land through scaling into commercial farming, increasing government spending on vital infrastructure, and strengthening oversight of the South Sudanese government in its response towards foreign aid. With these changes, much needed resources will be distributed to the right population, paving a way for improvements towards food security.

Established in 2011 as a federal presidential constitutional republic, South Sudan encompasses 644,329 square kilometers of land with a total population of 10.97 million. It is completely landlocked, surrounded by the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda. South Sudan's topography primarily features tropical forests, swamps and grassland. A distinct region is The Sudd, a vast swamp at the country's center ("Africa: South Sudan"). While seasonal rainfall divides the year into dry and wet seasons, the climate in South Sudan is consistently hot. About 50% of its arable land is prime agricultural land, but less than 5% is currently being cultivated. Of the crops cultivated in South Sudan, 80% percent are cereals, including wheat, sorghum, millet, corn and rice. The average farm size is between 0.4-1.7 hectares, which is comparable to 1-2 soccer fields ("Development of Agriculture" 133-134). South Sudan's major exports are crude petroleum, scrap iron, and aircraft parts ("South Sudan" [OEC]).

Two major ethnic groups in South Sudan are the Dika and the Nuer. In 2018, about 20% of the total population was urbanized, with the rest dispersed among rural communities ("South Sudan" [UN DESA]). In South Sudan, over 70% percent of the people cannot read or write, and in 2016, education expenditures accounted for only 1.8% percent of South Sudan's GDP. The risk of contracting an infectious disease in South Sudan is very high. Common infectious diseases include food or waterborne diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever, as well as vector-borne diseases such as malaria ("Africa: South Sudan"). According to UNICEF, only 41% percent of children in South Sudan have safe and clean water to drink ("Safe Water in South Sudan"). In 2018, USAID published a survey showing that a large number of people in South Sudan do not use latrines, either because they are overcrowded or because they are not accessible ("South Sudan - Water, Sanitation" 3).

In South Sudan, the average family size is 5.9 people ("Household Size" 12). In 2013, over 90% of dwellings in South Sudan were grass-thatched mud huts, also known as tukuls ("Over 90% of houses"). The circular walls of tukuls are constructed from sundried bricks made by mixing mud and water, while the conical roofs are made of grass or other locally sourced materials. According to the Enough Project, sorghum is a staple in the South Sudanese diet; "the grain can be cooked and eaten alone, turned into stews, and ground into flour and used to make a traditional South Sudanese flatbread called kiswa"

(Hornor). Most households have limited access to water, electricity, gas, roads, and local markets, making the process of food preparation in rural households quite time-consuming. Women are usually tasked with gathering food, water, and ignition oil. About 90% of people in South Sudan earn their living through agriculture, and many rural households practice subsistence farming, in which individual farms produce enough to feed their household (“South Sudan: FAO in Emergencies”). In urban regions, examples of jobs include teachers and laborers. The CIA World Factbook reports that two thirds of South Sudan’s population live on less than \$2 a day. Barriers that each household face in earning a living and enjoying a nutritious diet include lack of resources among farmers, high inflation and food prices, as well as well as internal displacement (“Monitoring food security” 21). All of these barriers are tied to the recent civil war that has ravaged South Sudan in recent years.

Between 1955 and 2005, two civil wars were fought between the Government of Sudan and separationist forces in South Sudan. After 98% of people voted for secession from Sudan, the Republic of South Sudan was established, making it the youngest nation in the world. In 2013, President Salva Kiir ousted then vice-president Riek Machar from his cabinet, claiming that Machar had been involved in a plot to overthrow the government. The country broke into civil war less than two years after its establishment. Famine was declared in February 2017, and by August, the number of refugees leaving South Sudan for Uganda had surpassed one million. In late 2018, following numerous agreements that had been signed then broken, President Kiir and former vice-president Machar signed a power-sharing agreement (“South Sudan profile – Timeline”). The recent conflict along with two previous wars against the government of Sudan has resulted in millions of fatalities and exacerbated widespread problems challenging the future peace and stability of the country.

One of the leading factors that has contributed to South Sudan’s conflicts is dissent between the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups. Even before South Sudan’s establishment, ethnic tensions ran high among South Sudanese troops. In fact, TIME magazine reported that more southerners died at the hands of fellow southerners than northerners during the second war fought against Sudan (Boswell). During the decades-long conflict, each ethnicity trained and deployed separate militias. As a result, when the South Sudanese government was formed with President Kiir, a Dinka, at the helm and Riek Machar, a Nuer, as Vice-President, trouble was already looming in sight. The civil war that broke out in 2013 exposed ethnic divisions in South Sudan and led to several massacres in which the government, predominantly Dinka, was accused of perpetuating ethnic violence against the Nuer minority. Although the U.N. backed peace agreement of late 2018 has brought peace back to South Sudan, the volatile political situation in South Sudan could easily lead to another civil war.

The humanitarian crisis in South Sudan has only been magnified by conflict. In January 2019, it was reported that 6.1 million people – nearly 60% of South Sudan’s population – were acutely food insecure. In addition, the U.N. reported that the conflict in South Sudan has resulted in 2.2 million refugees, with 1.96 million people internally displaced and about 300,000 refugees from other countries currently being hosted (“Monitoring food security” 20). While the troops engaged in active conflict were predominantly men, this conflict has impacted women and children by spiking the rates of sexual violence against women and malnutrition among children. According to the United Nations, 860,000 children under the age of five in South Sudan are severely malnourished. In addition, many children were enlisted as child soldiers during the conflict (“Without scaled-up humanitarian assistance”). Among urban populations, the conflict has led to bloodshed especially in the nation’s capital Juba. In rural areas, farmers have been forced to abandon their farms because of widespread unrest.

While South Sudan is currently at peace, an action plan involving changes at all levels is needed to improve food security. At the local level, increased cultivation of arable land through scaling up to

commercial farming would increase food production. At the national level, use of humanitarian funds towards vital infrastructure would benefit South Sudanese farmers through improving access to resources and markets. At the international level, keeping the government accountable for its use of foreign aid and holding it accountable for denying civilians access to humanitarian aid would pave the way for long-term stability in South Sudan.

At the local level, South Sudanese farmers should increase production through expanding the area of land under cultivation. Currently, 70% of land in South Sudan is suitable for farming, but less than 5% is currently being cultivated (Bramlet). Changing the status quo would involve stakeholders such as the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, which provides training and resources for South Sudanese farmers and helps displaced farmers return to their land after conflict. The FAO has “supported 2.7 million people with tools and a total of 4800 tons of agricultural seeds during the main planting season so that they can increase cereal production” (“South Sudan: FAO in Emergencies”). It has also provided agricultural education for rural farmers that blend native farming practices with modern technologies. However, equipping farmers with the right tools and knowledge is not enough – farmers need to capitalize on the arable yet uncultivated land to maximize their agricultural profits.

One solution is giving farmers tools and techniques to expand beyond subsistence farming and into commercial farming. Currently, most of South Sudan’s rural population practices subsistence agriculture, in which farmers plant enough to satisfy the needs of their own individual households. Expanding into commercial agriculture would enable farmers in South Sudan to make economic profits from surplus produce, save for the future, and increase the area of uncultivated land. The FAO could continue supporting farmers with quality seeds and trainings, but better equipment and modern technology are also needed to scale up from subsistence farming. Expensive resources could be shared by rural communities or via cooperatives. Unless more local farmers are equipped with the resources to expand into large-scale farming and capitalize on uncultivated arable land, South Sudan will likely never be able to pull itself out of the current food crisis.

At the national level, the South Sudanese government should allocate more of its foreign aid towards improving infrastructure. Currently, there are few paved roads in South Sudan, significantly limiting travel between rural and urban communities. Better and additional roads would enable farmers to expand into commercial agriculture by connecting them to resources and markets, stimulating agricultural production and business. Besides farming, the livestock industry would benefit from improved infrastructure. The success of South Sudan’s cold chain system, which ensures that drugs and vaccines distributed to livestock, relies on efficient transportation. The government should additionally develop a stronger water supply network that would include wells, reservoirs, and pipelines. Since much of South Sudan’s rural population do not have access to safe sources of water during its harsh dry season, families are forced to drink contaminated water or trek long distances for safe water. In order for farmers at the local level to scale up into commercial agriculture, they must also have access to dependable sources of water. This problem could be alleviated through government partnerships with faith communities who would distribute clean water or with organizations such as Water for South Sudan which provides funding and technology for drilling wells in villages across the nation.

At the international level, South Sudan should be kept accountable for its use of foreign aid and held responsible for its denial of humanitarian aid to civilians in need. Historically, the United States has been South Sudan’s leading financial aid donor, contributing billions of dollars to the world’s newest country. As aid to South Sudan was recently reassessed in 2018, it became evident that sentiments among senior U.S. leadership had shifted. Former ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley described President Kiir’s government as an “unfit partner” in promoting peace, calling for the United Nation’s Security Council to

impose arms embargo against South Sudan to reduce further conflict (Lederer). According to a White House foreign policy statement in May 2018, the leaders of South Sudan had “squandered this partnership [with the United States], pilfered the wealth of South Sudan, killed their own people, and repeatedly demonstrated their inability and unwillingness to live up to their commitments to end the country’s civil war. The result is one of Africa’s worst humanitarian disasters” (“Statement from the Press Secretary”).

Instead of scaling back on the amount of aid to South Sudan, the United States and other donors should keep the South Sudanese government accountable in its use of humanitarian aid. Since foreign donors have an upper hand in negotiations considering the money at stake, they should act upon this advantage to make sure that funds are not being emptied into a black hole of corruption. To reach this end, a contract should be drawn up between foreign donors and the South Sudanese government, with promised funds staggered across multiple years. First, a third party such as a research institution should assess South Sudan’s current economy, focusing on critical areas such as food security, infrastructure, education, and industrial production. Together, the government and donors could then determine the amount of funds supplied to each critical area. At the end of each year, the South Sudanese government should be required to provide a detailed report to donors regarding the allocation and impact of humanitarian funds, as well as provide future projections for the progress of each critical area. Periodic assessments could also be conducted by the third party. If the third-party assessment, government report, and future projections show that appropriate progress has been made with the funds and that future progress is possible with more funding, then funds should continue to be supplied for the next year. Otherwise, donors should have the right to withdraw from their contract with the South Sudanese government and directly support entities such as the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations or Water for South Sudan instead. Only by keeping the South Sudanese government accountable can donors and other powerful international stakeholders ensure that their financial aid is reaching civilians in need, instead of enriching government elites.

According to the United Nations, an important obstacle regarding South Sudan’s crisis is that the government led by President Kiir has obstructed humanitarian aid and workers from reaching civilians in need. This is a clear effort on the government’s part to weaponize and politicize aid, thus denying civilians access to the most vital resources. According to the United Nations, “about 65–80 security incidents were reported monthly across the country between July and September [2018]– most of them targeting humanitarian operators” (“Monitoring food security” 21). In response to these violations of basic human rights, the United Nations should set up a special committee under its International Law Commission to investigate and penalize obstruction of humanitarian aid. As an intergovernmental organization, the United Nations could also be involved in the contract between South Sudan’s government and potential donors. It is inconceivable for the South Sudanese government to have access to foreign funds while it denies civilian access to humanitarian aid. If South Sudan’s government continues to be a perpetrator of human rights offenses, international donors should withhold funds until appropriate measures are taken on the government’s part to ensure that civilians are allowed to access humanitarian aid and that humanitarian operators can work in safety. Until these measures are attained, humanitarian workers in South Sudan should be protected by United Nations peacekeepers, as these negotiations could further jeopardize their safety.

To conclude, although South Sudan has been ravaged by bloody wars and conflicts, extensive changes at all levels could introduce progress to a country mired in humanitarian crisis especially during this time of relative peace. At the local level, farmers should be equipped to expand into commercial agriculture to capitalize on the nation’s abundance of prime agricultural land. At the national level, the government should utilize foreign aid to improve on vital infrastructure including roads and accessible water. At the

international level, key stakeholders should keep the South Sudanese government accountable in its use of foreign funds and hold it responsible for denying civilians access to humanitarian aid. In order for an action plan involving these solutions to be sustainable in the long run, several key aspects must be considered. For example, if South Sudan's government is to be held responsible for such violations, the United Nations will have to tread lightly as penalties could result in worsening of South Sudan's humanitarian crisis and lead to future instability in the nation. Additionally, expansion of land under cultivation could worsen ethnic tensions as people are brought into closer proximity with one other. In the end though, if broad economic, social, and political improvements are made with the cooperation of local farmers and organizations, the government, and international stakeholders, there is hope for long-term stability and food security in South Sudan.

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