



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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Weekly Review

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Food Security: A Matter Deserving National Discourse

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This past week saw two significant events happening in Juba: The annual Governors' Forum and the Agriculture Trade Fair. Although separately planned, the timing and the underpinning theme, "food security", joined the two programs. Food security is an important matter that deserves attention at the highest national level and this opinion piece seeks to highlight issues that inhibit South Sudan from achieving food security. Specifically, the paper examines South Sudan's national policy on food security and how the political rhetoric pars with practice. Before delving further into this subject, it is important to understand first what food security is.

In the 1996 World Food Summit emerged a widely accepted definition of food security as existing "*when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life*" (FAO)¹. From this conceptualization, food security is understood to hinge on three pillars: **Food availability**, **food access**, and **food use**. In light of these three pillars, where does South Sudan stand? South Sudanese need not be persuaded to accept the fact that they are starving all over the country and that there is not enough food available; hence, the food availability principle is far from being met in the nascent country. The annual shortfall of food in June and July is understood as the time of the year when many people in South Sudan go hungry. This fact justifies the continuing presence of the World Food Program (WFP) in the country to bridge the food gap. It also explains why South Sudan imported 44.5 billion dollars' worth of food items in 2010².

The recent crisis related to oil stoppage and subsequent closure of north-south border, led to soaring prices of most food items in the market beyond the reach of so many people. Although recent reports from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) and the Famine Early Warning Network (FEWS NET) suggest that food prices are dropping as a result of this year's harvest³, which is expected to amount to near-average, the same reports stressed that

¹ FAO was quoted on the World Health Organization (WHO) website. The author accessed this information on <http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story028/en/>. Accessed on Thursday November 29, 2012 at 3:17 pm local time. FAO's website was also visited: www.fao.org/spfs/.

² <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article44705> accessed on December 2, 2012 5:00 pm.

³ National Bureau of Statistics recent CPI report for October 2012. The Famine Early Warning Network Food Security Outlook for South Sudan October 2012—March 2013.

many South Sudanese remain in dire need of food because the present production is inadequate to take the nation beyond March 2013⁴.

Fresh reports on flooding in many areas of Unity, Upper Nile, Warrap, and Jonglei states and the crop failure reported in Lakes State, do not help but exacerbate the situation. What is more, the widespread insecurity caused mostly by ethnic violence and rebel activities in Pibor and other areas, have left so many families vulnerable and in need of food. It is therefore not an overstatement to suggest that South Sudan is locked in a perpetual food deficit, as the country has not been able to produce enough food despite its vast endowment of natural resources. Acute food shortages in 2008 and 2009 swayed the government to draw up a plan to build food stores across the country in an attempt to boost food supply. That plan however, crafted to serve as a remedy for food shortages in the interim, resulted in the biggest scandal in the history of South Sudan; best known as the Dura Saga. This scandal, while crippling the government's efforts, is yet to be sufficiently investigated, and not much in a way of practical policy proposals was brought forward again until this conference on food security. In short, significant food availability (supply) remains a distant dream in South Sudan.

Logic would dictate that when the principle of food supply remains unfulfilled, it makes no sense to discuss access. Though it was reported that Western Equatoria and Renk in Upper Nile have food surpluses, it is still insufficient to feed the whole country. For argument's sake, however, let's assume that there was sufficient food supply in those states, would people be able to access it? The answer is simply no, because the road networks linking the states and the country to the region are so poor, preventing food access to places where it is needed the most. Furthermore, with the extreme level of poverty in the country, even if there were sufficient supply of food in the market, many people would not afford it, especially if the distributive powers are left to the market alone. Nearly 56% of the rural populations fall below the poverty line and more than half of the entire population is in extreme poverty⁵. Any given solution to food accessibility problem would have to account for purchasing power of a household living in a remote village, or a jobless person living in any of the big towns.

When access to food is challenging, choices are limited and so the principle of balanced diet intake becomes secondary. This is consistent with Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, which tells us that people must fulfill their physiological needs before thinking about safety needs. In rural South Sudan today, people barely eat one meal a day and questions of nutritional value of food are put off until further notice. Visiting numerous villages in different regions of this country, malnutrition is conspicuously evident in the eyes and physical appearances of children, women, and the elderly. The deficiency stems from the paucity of food intake on daily basis and often, majority of the food intake is carbohydrate with some limited protein. The supply of protective nutrients like vitamins, fat and other vital elements is acutely

⁴ The Famine Early Warning Network Food Security Outlook for South Sudan October 2012—March 2013.

⁵ SSCCSE National Baseline Survey, 2009: Poverty in Southern Sudan. Accessed at <http://ssnbs.org/storage/NBHS%20Final%20website.pdf> on December 1, 2012

limited. Consequently, not only are people starving, sicknesses and other health related problems that spring from poor diet are on a rage costing poor people disproportionately in terms of lives and health care expenditure. It is a vicious cycle with no imminent end in sight. These are few examples that highlight the severity of food deficit in South Sudan and validate the call for the elevation of food security debate to the highest level of the country's political leadership.

Where is the government in all this? Prior to the signing of the CPA, looking back at economic development policies of the SPLM, there was a recognition that economic growth in South Sudan will hinge on the development and transformation of rural agriculture through technological innovation. This was based on the realization that oil reserves were finite, so the oil revenues would be used to develop agriculture. Dr. Garang articulated this policy very well in his speech delivered on the occasion of the signing of the CPA in 2005 when he stated:

The SPLM shall adopt an economic development paradigm that emphasizes economic growth through rural development and transformation of traditional agriculture that is integrated with agro-industries. We must transform the present subsistence traditional agriculture in Southern Sudan...through technological innovations, making agriculture the engine of growth. The SPLM vision and slogan shall be to "use the oil revenues to fuel agriculture".

In May 2010⁶, a month after the Sudanese general elections, President Kiir called for an SPLM political conference involving governors and the top echelon of the party leadership to discuss policies, priorities, programs, and strategies to realize the promises made to the people of Southern Sudan at the time. The result was a policy framework in which the party foresaw the "development of the agriculture sector... as the most important source of wealth and is essential to food security...and economic growth". Consistent with the Maputo Declaration on Agriculture and Food Security⁷, the party promised to "immediately allocate at least 10% of the oil revenue for agriculture, forestry, fisheries and livestock". This policy is widely reported as having been adopted on November 30, 2012 as one of the resolutions endorsed during the 2nd Governors' Forum. This also supports the assertion in the South Sudan Development Plan where the government plans to increase cereal production consistently above 1.0 million metric tons per year by 2013⁸. Opening the 2nd Governors' Forum and Agriculture Trade Fair last week, the President reiterated a declaration he made in his speech on the first anniversary of independence that South Sudan would achieve food security by 2015.

Why is there not much in terms of agricultural output realized given the government's vision to develop agriculture? Many factors account for this inability of South Sudan to achieve food security including the nagging widespread insecurity, flooding, short or intermittent rainfalls, outdated agricultural methods, unambitious culture, the recent shutdown of oil and

⁶ SPLM Policy Framework for the GoSS 2010. Accessed at www.splmtoday.com on Thursday November 29, 2012.

⁷ <http://www.nepad.org/system/files/Maputo%20Declaration.pdf> accessed on Monday December 3, 2012. The Declaration on Agriculture and Food Security requires that national governments commit *at least* 10% of national budgets for agriculture development.

⁸ South Sudan Development Plan 2011-2013 accessed on December 3, 2012 at <http://www.jdt-juba.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/South-Sudan-Development-Plan-2011-13.pdf>.

subsequent Austerity Measures, and poor roads network. Moreover, the government never put enough money into agriculture in the first place. For the entire interim period, the government has allocated less than 40 million pounds annually for agriculture. Nevertheless, the chief reason for this pervading food shortage is what appears to be a misplaced focus in terms of political direction. That is, the South Sudanese people were promised better days ahead as they gave ultimately to the cause that culminated in the CPA and independence, yet little have they seen resultant peace dividends. Perhaps it is also acceptable that the advent of the oil revenues flowing into the banks blinded the nation and derailed it from pursuing true economic growth path.

Although the SPLM had promised prior to the CPA to use oil resources to fuel agriculture, after the CPA, an excessive amount of cash hit the banks and the thinking probably changed subconsciously as some people might have thought that South Sudan would be like Saudi Arabia, with an infinite amount of oil supply; hence, never-ending cash source. Since this amount of money was a new development, most of it got misappropriated and the rest of it squirreled away until a well-known foe forced the country's leadership to stop the flow, unfortunately. Perhaps the nation did not even perceive the mean-spirited north to sabotage its treasure-trove, thinking of being in deep water with the oil revenues and cared so little about agriculture and whatever else the land is capable of generating. That seems to have become the nation's thinking, subconsciously.

This oil phenomenon, one would speculate, might have distracted the leadership from this aforementioned vision to the point of paying only a lip service in the last few years, and the cranked up rhetoric of how the country is going to be self-sufficient and produce its own food becoming a mere slogan. What should be realized is that the freedom the South Sudanese enjoy today came because many families in the pastoral, agrarian, and fishing communities contributed their cattle, milk, fish and *dura*⁹ to feed the people's army, the SPLA. In short, the SPLA survived long and tumultuous years together with the people; because it relied on the local economy led solely by agriculture. A simple payback to the people would have been a focus on agriculture in order to increase both food production and accessibility. So far, people are still waiting at least for a bite of the national cake. How does the country get out of this ditch? To respond to this grim situation the following policy suggestions are recommended:

- The government should put agriculture back at the center of economic development fueled by oil resources (if any) as initially envisioned. This is because oil reserves in South Sudan are finite and could run out within the window of 8 to 10 or 20 years at most, not to mention the unreliability due to sabotage from the north and prices fluctuations in the world market.
- To curtail the rampant food shortages, the government needs to make a large initial investment in agriculture by developing large mechanized farms in the Green Belt and other places to ensure that enough food quantities are produced. These farms can be privatized later when the private sector is capable of managing and sustaining

⁹ Dura is a local name for different types of cereal crops (Sorghum).

such large-scale projects. One way to do this might be to establish agricultural banks at the states level to provide financing for farmers.

- Since the pattern of rains and duration have changed probably due to the global climatic change, the government should commission a scientific study to explore crop adaptation in South Sudan so that local farmers are advised and provided with appropriate tools and seeds that are adaptive to the changing weather patterns. Perhaps, it would be in the interest of the nation to start agriculture research centers where seeds can be crossbred and redistributed.
- People in pastoral communities are prone to malnutrition due to reliant primarily on milk and cereal crops. The government needs to design a program that encourages large- and small-scale vegetable and legumes farming, especially during the dry season to augment pastoral communities' diet. This situation is much worst in the Bahr el Ghazal and Upper Nile regions and may be parts of Eastern Equatoria.
- Once the government regains its solvency, it must embark on improving vital roads and communications in order to help improve food accessibility and access to markets.
- The government should develop an effective animal vaccination campaign and robust response system to animal diseases. For the last few years, East Coast Fever has almost entirely wiped out animal resources in Bor South and Awerial counties and the government has been slow to find cure.
- The government should develop an effective communications system that provide early warning on droughts, famines, pests, and floods so people can prepare adequately.
- Finally, the government needs to improve security all over the country and put an end to communal violence, cattle theft, and displacement of the people from their homes.

In conclusion, what happened this past week is important because at least the government has put on its agenda food security to be discussed at a higher level. This suggests that the government, in principle, wants to do something about this hunger that has ravaged the people of South Sudan for ages. This discussion needs not end in Juba; it should be extended to the states and counties so as to find a way out of this uncomfortable reality. The promise to improve agricultural output by investing 10% of the national budget for agriculture is a step forward, if it is kept. What was hoped to happen in this forum was for the government to come out with a strategic plan that puts agriculture back at the center of development and economic growth rather than continuing to rely on oil resources that are subject to sabotage and price fluctuations in the international markets. The resolutions of the forum are not out yet, but it would be disappointing of course, if the forum was one of the usually embellished high-level gatherings peppered with moribund slogans at the end of the

party. What the people of South want are not slogans, they need concrete steps to be taken by the government to end starvation and improve people's standard of living.

About Sudd Institute

The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.

About the Author

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