



# REVISITING FOOD AID AND FOOD SECURITY IN SOUTH SUDAN

Fifteen years in perspective

## INTRODUCTION

This short note aims at revisiting some of the current thinking on food aid and food security in South Sudan, in the light of 18 years<sup>1</sup> of observation of the sector in both South and North Sudan. The aim is to assess the appropriateness of the lens through which the aid community currently observes South Sudan and to ensure that some of the lessons learnt from the past are not forgotten.

This initiative has grown out of discussions which took place during a recent field evaluation mission in South Sudan, in the light of information collected in various evaluations since 1992. During this recent mission, the Groupe URD evaluation team visited several areas across some of the key agro-ecosystems of the South (livestock based systems and agricultural areas) in Central Equatoria as well as in Warab and Northern Bar El Gazhal. The team also interacted with a large number of actors of the aid system in Sudan: Sudanese authorities, donors, UN agencies, NGOs and ICRC).

, The following issues were explored:

- How the humanitarian response takes into account the diversity of existing agro-ecological conditions,
- The importance of livestock, fishery production and tubers in food security assessments,
- The need to reverse our paradigm: from a vulnerability loop to a resilience perspective;
- The urban versus rural paradigm: changes in demographic patterns as a result of political changes and developments
- The role of food security as part of the peace process: the macro-conflict over natural

resources (the North-South divide over the Nile waters) versus the micro-conflicts over pastoral and agricultural land.

## A LAND OF DIVERSITY

### DIVERSITY OF AGRO-ECOSYSTEMS

One of the most critical elements to take into account in any discourse about South Sudan, and even more in a discourse related to food security, is the extreme diversity of the agro-ecosystems and the modes of survival. From the flooded plains of Jongley and Bar El Ghazal, to the dry upper terraces of Toposa land in Eastern Equatoria, to the cassava production areas of Western Equatoria, South Sudan is composed of a wide variety of production systems formatted by different seasonal patterns: Some of these are intricately linked to the floods and water-receding process of the Nile river and its tributaries which model the pastoral and fishing communities of the Nile inner depression. Other systems are organized around the rain patterns: two rainy seasons in the South, only one as soon as the system is north of the Juba-Bor line. The agricultural systems resulting from these rainfall distributions are based on a combination of tubers, legumes and cereals, with tubers being proportionally more important in the south, whilst cereals are more predominant in the northern areas. Non-monetary exchange between these different systems was vital during the years of war. The post-peace accord (CPA) era has opened the way up for active resumption of trade between these complementary systems: livestock and fish produce can be exchanged for cereals and vegetable produce, as well as consumer goods which were not available during the war.

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<sup>1</sup> François Grünwald has carried out numerous missions in the Sudan since 1992, for ICRC, FAO, DFID, IGAD Working Group on Peace in Sudan and French bilateral aid.

entity, ignoring its diversity. This view results in a tendency to respond in a uniform way to what is actually a highly complex situation; responses are therefore necessarily inappropriate.

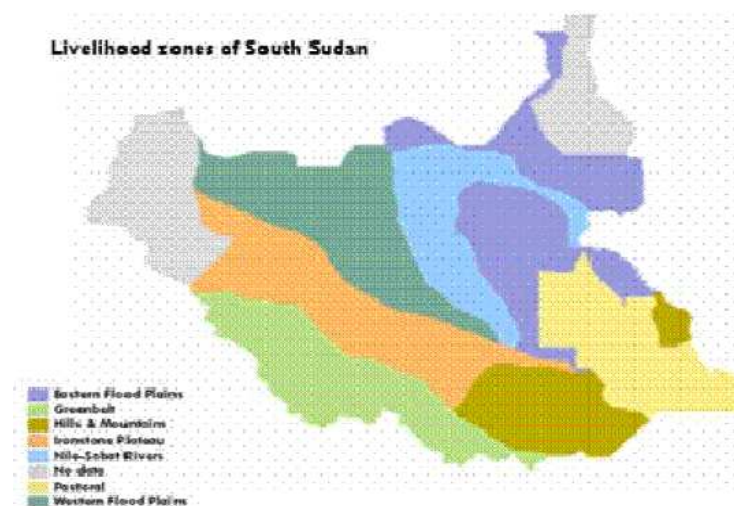
### DIVERSITY OF CULTURES AND ETHNICITIES; A COMPLEX RECENT HISTORY

South Sudan is a land of fascinating cultural and ethnic complexity: pastoral communities of the Nilotic lowlands are made up of several ethnic groups, with the Dinka and the Nuer being the largest of these groups, each made up of several clans. The history of the interrelations between these communities has been one of both exchange and conflict over pastoral lands, with a peculiar pattern related to the fact that the competition over land is not directly linked to dry and rainy seasons (as is the case in North Sudan or on the southern fringes at the border with Kenya and Ethiopia) but linked to access to pastures during the flood and water receding seasons. Access to land and to herds forms the back-bone of social relations, both within each of these communities and between them. All of these groups have played different roles in recent history, since the beginning of the war in the South. Some have allied themselves with the North, others have formed the front-line fighter groups of the Southern insurgency. The rivalry between groups and their leaders has created a very turbulent past; the Bar El Ghazal famine of 1998, the difficult negotiations of the CPA and even the questions over the death of John Garang are just the tips of the iceberg. The risk of inter-community tension surfaced again in recent months with increasing inter-ethnic tension over access to pastoral land.

Too often the humanitarian system tends to present South Sudan as a homogenous

### THE TOOLS FOR ANALYZING FOOD SECURITY

It is worth noting that in the 1990's some of the most sophisticated tools for food security analysis were developed specifically for South Sudan, including Save the Children's livelihood analysis and ICRC's analysis of the pillars of survival. It is rather surprising then that the knowledge of the analysis produced by many of these tools seems to have faded from memory. Important documents, such as the United Nations appeals, continue to construct their arguments and on shaky ground, based on an analysis of the 'production - consumption' equation and supposedly widespread malnutrition, leading to fundamental questions about the methodology used.



## FOOD SECURITY ASSESSMENT

The challenge of understanding the diversity of South Sudan is amply demonstrated by the way in which food security is assessed. The usual FAO-WFP food security assessment which is carried out every year and is based on the production/consumption equation, result in compiled tables which have three main characteristics:

- They by and large ignore the contribution of the livestock sector and the fishery sector to food security in the South. The maps show high deficits in areas which do not produce cereal but have livestock, leading to ill-founded conclusions. It is similar to saying that New York is a food deficit area....



( photo Groupe URD, Juba, 2010)

- The non-cereal production, i.e. the tuber (cassava and sweet potatoes) and legumes (peas, groundnuts, etc.) are not taken into account in the calculation. A simple trip from Juba to Yeil or to Kajo Kaji demonstrates how serious such an omission is. On these roads, you see hectares of cassava and groundnut fields.



( photo Groupe URD, Yeil, 2010)

- These assessment missions always result in findings which are calculated in terms of food deficit, which should be responded to by food aid. The aid system therefore becomes de facto self-perpetuating, creating aid dependence and restricting people from building up their own survival mechanisms.

## THE MALNUTRITION DEBATES

The measurement of malnutrition has been a subject of debate in South Sudan since the end of the 1980's. Challenging the then prevailing reference tables calculated on the basis of US bottle-fed children in the 1970's became essential. The new and recently introduced WHO tables aim to respond to this debate by introducing a reference table calculated on a more diverse world population. Yet, even these tables have failed to take into account the particular anthropological characteristics of the long-legged pastoral groups of east Africa. For all 3 indicators (Weight/Height, Weight/Age, Height/Age), the measurements of Nilotic groups compared to the international reference values always show levels of malnutrition, even for a healthy population.

18 years later, the questions raised during the pre-OLS period still remain largely unanswered. Thus we see malnutrition all over South Sudan...

**De facto, the assessment is biased and there is a high risk of the aid response being inappropriately designed and implemented.**

## SURVIVAL IN A HOSTILE AND EVER CHANGING WORLD: KEY OPPORTUNITIES

### SUPPORTING RESILIENCE

The rhetoric of the aid sector in Sudan talks much of vulnerability. It is often forgotten that the societies and the people of South Sudan are some of the most resilient in the world. Surviving in the Sudd, in the flooded plains of the Bar El Gazhal or the Sombat river area requires both strong social systems and sophisticated survival mechanisms. Yet, many of these survival mechanisms have been weakened by the aid system.

**During Operation Life Line Sudan, several studies demonstrated that an overly developed supply of food aid tends to weaken the capacity of people to use their own coping mechanisms. It seems that these lessons have once again been forgotten.**



(photo Groupe URD, Yeil, 2010)

Some fascinating changes are currently taking place:

- The return of hundreds of thousands of formally displaced persons from the North as part of the pre-referendum movement, with hopes of possible independence. The current response to these movements is organized in terms of food aid through different forms (in-kind, vouchers, etc.).

- However, the massive effort needed to recapitalize the rural economy is largely under financed and the largest amount of resources continues to go to food aid.

**This trend should be reversed and massive efforts should be made to put the livestock high up on the South Sudan aid agenda.**

- The rural to urban migrations which were halted by decades of war are currently moving at an accelerated pace. Recent years of peace have enabled major cities to grow in size. This process of urbanization is also gaining momentum with the return of the large displaced Southerner communities that spent years in the IDP camps in the North, especially in Khartoum, and have adapted to an urban livelihood system. These new urban dwellers in South Sudan need jobs, yet the economy is still in its early stages of development. Local markets for rural products are likely to grow rapidly in the near future.

Financing the agro-business sector is essential to supply the rapidly growing urban markets: food processing including meat and non-meat animal products, fishery products and peri-urban agriculture for fresh food to supply, should all receive proper attention.

### MANAGING SPACE, NATURAL RESOURCES AND PEACE

In the last decades of war, conflict over resources and particularly land use have in many ways been overshadowed by the North-South conflict. Furthermore, these more local conflicts were largely instrumentalized as part of a “divide and rule” strategy. The map below illustrates all the displacements that resulted from the large range of inter-community aggression. This should change if the referendum succeeds in providing sustainable peace.

Mechanisms to solve local conflicts have existed and been functional for centuries, but were largely jeopardised by the 1986-2005 war and the ready availability of small-arms. However, little would be needed to help make these conflict-resolution mechanisms functional again.

Food aid has proved over time that it can be a double-edged sword. It is time to change the paradigms and strengthen food security instead, creating a strong foundation for durable peace. But

