

DISPLACED TASTES

# South Sudan's food imports in the time of COVID-19

BY EDWARD THOMAS



Trucks are waiting in the border in Elegu, Uganda. © Andreea Campeanu

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) of 2020 is likely to have profound effects on stressed food systems in already hungry countries. Even before South Sudan reported its first COVID-19 case at the beginning of April, media reports indicated that the pandemic had led to restrictions on the movement of goods from neighbouring countries, which affected prices in markets across the country.<sup>1</sup> In Juba, the price of a kilogram of maize flour increased from 159 South Sudanese Pounds (SSP) in April 2019 to SSP 298 in April 2020.<sup>2</sup> Import volumes have fallen by up to 50 per cent.<sup>3</sup> South Sudan now faces the risk of a protracted pandemic with unpredictable consequences for cereal imports and domestic supplies.<sup>4</sup>

Cereal imports make up a significant proportion of the calories consumed in South Sudan. These increased significantly in the years between the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, which coincided with an oil boom, and the re-start of conflicts in 2012/13. South Sudan is sometimes seen as an outlier or an exception, but in many respects it exemplifies wider trends in the African continent. South Sudan's transition towards dependence on imported cereals reflects wider patterns, although its transition has probably happened at a faster pace. In 1980, Africa's food imports were worth about USD 7 billion: the same as its food exports. Over the next two decades, exports stagnated and imports grew. In 2007, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that imports exceeded exports by about USD 22 billion. Cereal imports made up almost half of the total.<sup>5</sup> In 2015, the African Development Bank estimated that net food imports were at USD 35 billion, and that on current trends, net food imports would be worth over USD 110 billion by 2025.<sup>6</sup>

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## Food imports and global food price spikes

Import dependence exposes countries like South Sudan to international cereal and food price volatility. That volatility has increased significantly over the course of the twenty-first century. Figure 7 shows FAO's inflation-adjusted cereal price index over three decades.

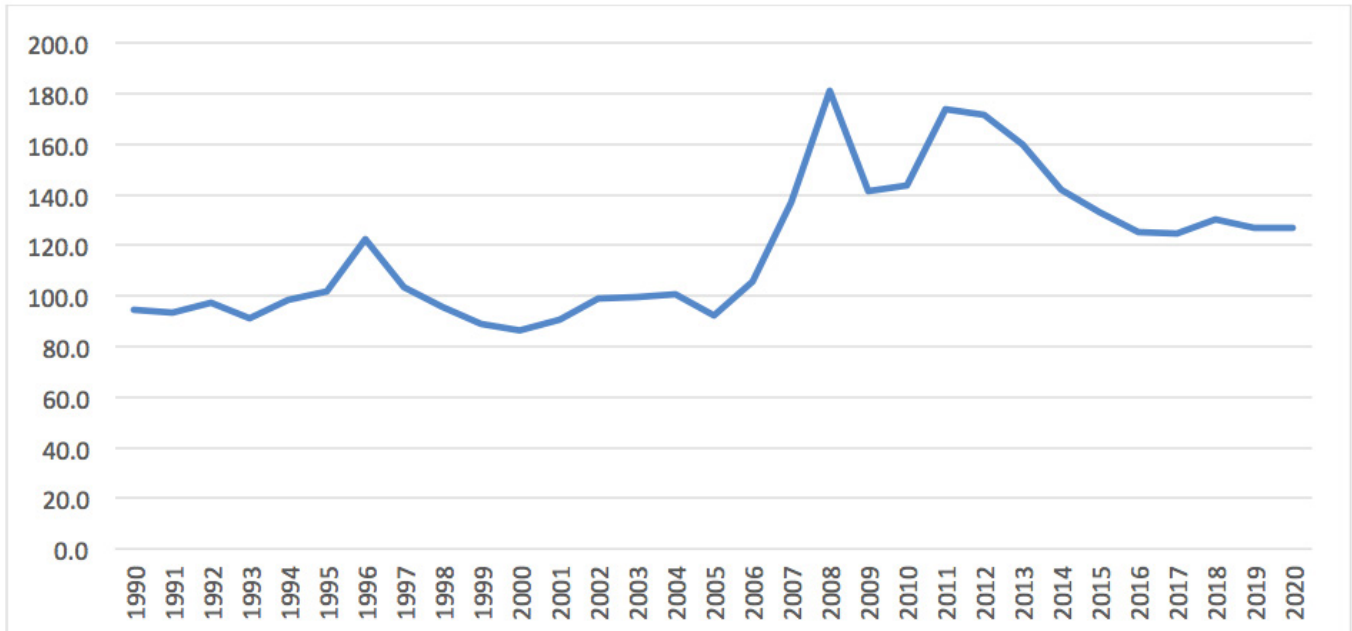


Figure 7. FAO cereal price index, adjusted for inflation. 2002–2004 price = 100.<sup>7</sup>

What effect did price spikes have on South Sudan? During the three peak (spike) years—1996, 2008 and 2011 (shown in Figure 7)—FAO and the World Food Programme (WFP) reported on prices in South Sudan. In 1996, present-day South Sudan was part of Sudan, and Sudan as a whole had an excellent harvest, despite the civil war in the south. In those days, the UN's capacity to monitor food prices in the south was limited. FAO reported that harvests were good in grain-producing areas of northern Sudan. But good harvests were not enough to keep hunger at bay in deficit areas, such as the south, because many Sudanese farmers with surplus production raised their prices to match international ones. In 1997, FAO wrote: 'Although supplies of sorghum are moving from surplus to deficit areas, prices are extremely high and out of the reach of sectors of the population with low purchasing power'.<sup>8</sup>

A decade later the spike in food prices, which peaked in 2007/08, was linked to conditions in global commodity and financial markets, and to the global financial crisis that ensued. In South Sudan, the global cereal price increase was one of the main drivers of significant price increases for all food commodities in all markets. In October 2008, prices for sorghum in Juba were about 50 per cent higher than in October 2007. In Malakal, sorghum prices doubled over the same period.<sup>9</sup>

The 2011 food price spike was implicated in the famine of the same year in conflict-affected Somalia.<sup>10</sup> South Sudan's food prices increased dramatically too. But it is difficult to quantify the influence global cereal price rises had on South Sudanese prices, or to quantify the effect on South Sudan's already-precarious household food security. International prices were only one factor affecting domestic cereal prices in South Sudan; climate, conflict, currency crises and relations with Sudan were also influential. And just as the causes of food price inflation are multi-factoral, its effects are multi-dimensional. In 2008 and 2011, FAO and WFP reported that agricultural wages and livestock prices increased in South Sudan. In 2011, when households were asked to list the main shocks they face, 'food too expensive' was the most common response.<sup>11</sup>

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## Food price rises and social unrest

Many African cities witnessed food riots during the price spike of 2007/08.<sup>12</sup> In South Sudan, these food price spikes coincided with serious rural unrest. The 2008 unrest in Greater Upper Nile was linked to several factors. The government's violent, ill-sequenced, ethnically-targeted civilian disarmament campaign was the most visible factor. The disarmament took place in areas of historic, structural food deficits, such as the Lou Nuer areas of northern Jonglei. Over decades of conflict, local people adopted new strategies for dealing with food deficits. One was the food market: Jonglei became highly dependent on purchased food, although it was a state where little money circulated. Another was guns and raiding, which became adjuncts to food production.<sup>13</sup>

The 2008 global cereal price spike came at a bad time for Greater Upper Nile. Its version of unrest was very different from street protests that were simultaneously taking place in the Tunisian mining region of Gafsa, the Cameroonian capital, Yaounde and the Somali capital, Mogadishu. Instead, thousands of young men from one ethnic community launched devastating cattle raids against their neighbouring ethnic communities. The violence prefigured that of South Sudan's civil war, which began in 2013 and it seems likely that it was catalyzed by the effect of food price rises on deeply stressed food systems. During the global food price spikes of 2008, 2011 and today, hunger and unrest converge in food deficit areas like Jonglei.

Interpreting the violence in places like Jonglei is a challenge. The data does not show a simple, cause-and-effect relationship between food price shocks and social crises. Since the global cereal price spike of 2011, prices have been declining, and increasing the risks that international food markets may present to societies, like South Sudan, living through violent change. COVID-19 may yet bring these risks starkly into focus.

## Food price rises and cash transfers

Since the shocks of the period from 2007–2011, the global cereal price index has seen sustained and marked decreases. In many countries, policymakers have pushed people towards dependence on cereal markets that are geared to international price mechanisms. The rise in cash transfers is one of the ways in which humanitarian agencies foster market dependence. In the whole of 2014, WFP distributed USD 1.3 million in cash transfers: in December 2019, it distributed USD 3.6 million in cash transfers in one month alone.<sup>14</sup>

Part of the reason that cash transfers worked is that they were implemented during years of declining international cereal prices. This decline may have helped South Sudanese people deal with the dramatic increase in food insecurity resulting from conflict, food price inflation, and linked economic crises. Basic food commodities, priced in South Sudanese pounds, quickly became unaffordable. Cash transfers were able to help South Sudanese beneficiaries to manage food price inflation because they were backed by US dollars and rose in value as the South Sudanese pound fell. And in any case, international US dollar prices for those commodities were undergoing a decade of decline. A global price shock, triggered by the pandemic, may well upend this system. If local currency cash transfers do not keep up with rising international prices, in US dollars, the utility of those transfers may come into question.

## Potential consequences of COVID-19

Today, food insecurity is devastating South Sudan. This insecurity is linked to South Sudan's conflicts, but also to a less visible factor its move towards markets. Producing food for markets rather than for home consumption, turning food into a commodity and turning farmers into wage workers—all these shifts appear to be implicated in the country's hunger crisis.<sup>15</sup>

The move towards markets has acquired enormous momentum. Conflict intensifies hunger, displaces farmers and accelerates the process. The civil war that began in 2013 has deepened food insecurity. In December 2011, the widely used Integrated Food Security Phase Classification found that 25 per cent of the South Sudanese population faced crisis (Phase 3) or emergency (Phase 4) levels of food insecurity. In January

2020, 45.2 per cent of the population faced crisis or worse-than-crisis levels of food insecurity, and that figure was projected to rise to 55 per cent between May and July, the pre-harvest dearth.<sup>16</sup>



Women in the vegetables market in Gudele, Juba, South Sudan. © Andreea Campeanu

If there is a global cereal price spike in 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it may play out differently this time—global food stocks are high and this may cushion markets.<sup>17</sup> FAO estimates that South Sudan’s 2019 cereal harvest, which forms the basis of 2020 consumption, was 818,486 metric tonnes (better than the previous two years). It estimates that the cereal deficit, which forms the basis of demand for imports, was 482,504 metric tonnes. Some of this deficit will be met by food aid—in recent years, WFP supplies have amounted to about half of FAO’s deficit estimates.

The deficit leaves South Sudan with a significant dependence on imported food. Most of its cereal imports come from the regional grain market, but that market is getting tighter and COVID-19 may accentuate this trend. According to FAO reports, East African regional food stocks were below average after the 2019 harvest: ‘Exportable cereal surpluses in the region were 18 percent below average, with Uganda’s production being 9 percent below average.’<sup>18</sup> During the pandemic, regional governments have indicated that they will allow commercial and humanitarian cargo to keep moving, despite current movement restrictions. However, grain prices in Juba rose by 20-36 per cent in the last two weeks of March, with maize rising faster than locally produced sorghum.<sup>19</sup> Part of the reason for the rise in prices in March 2020 is decreased supply. Exports of Ugandan maize to South Sudan declined by 30-50 per cent in the last two weeks of March. Initial reports suggest that traders and consumers were responding to decreased availability by decreasing consumption.

In February 2020, the World Bank published a cautiously optimistic forecast for South Sudan’s growth rates, based on increased oil production and regional growth. Economic growth, the Bank argued, might allow South Sudan to address the deep poverty which the conflict has helped create, and to finance its costly peace agreement—the government budget trebled relative to GDP in the financial year 2019–2020.<sup>20</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended those forecasts, and the linked steep decline in oil prices may yet affect the South Sudanese currency, and its ability to finance cereal imports. FAO reported in April 2020 that South Sudanese traders were unable to obtain sufficient foreign currency.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, some observers argue that cereal traders may no longer need foreign currency, pointing to the sharp decline in trade volumes.

If the market in imported cereals is depressed by movement restrictions and deepening poverty, could consumption needs be met by domestic production for domestic markets? Markets are the primary mechanism for dealing with this cereal deficit. Markets have steadily declined in relative importance as

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a food source. In the lean season of 2011, WFP estimated that 75 per cent of sorghum was bought from markets: in the 2018 lean season, that figure dropped to 41 per cent.<sup>22</sup> Market-dependent populations include the urban population and displaced persons and the populations of states where market transformation is advancing most quickly, such as Central Equatoria, Western and Northern Bahr al-Ghazal, Warrap, and Upper Nile.

But domestic production for markets faces many challenges. Cereal deficits have risen during the conflict. Farmers displaced from border areas to Uganda began returning to their lands to cultivate earlier this year, but movement restrictions as a result of COVID-19 have put an end to that recovery. Unpredictable rains led to droughts and flooding in the last cultivation season, which affected production. A serious East African locust plague could hit South Sudan, with potentially devastating consequences.

Even if production increases this year, getting food to markets and market-dependent populations is an enormous challenge. Many farmers trade cereals, but they do so in small quantities and poor infrastructure means that South Sudan's domestic production does not circulate far from where it is produced. Small-scale farmers cannot ramp up production in a social vacuum: they need to mobilize wage labour and even sometimes rent land. Often the workers and land become available as a result of displacement: the process of commodifying land and labour has heavy social costs that are poorly understood.

Food aid is a secondary mechanism for dealing with food deficits. Only in a few areas where intense conflict interacts with structural food deficits has food aid become the main mechanism for addressing food deficits in the pre-harvest lean season—areas like northern Jonglei are among the most food-insecure in the world. But although food aid deliveries in South Sudan only provide about ten per cent of calories consumed in the country, South Sudan is one of the world's biggest consumers already, in a year when these requirements are likely to rise. Any reductions in food aid due to COVID-19 will put pressure on stressed productions.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a serious risk to food security in South Sudan. Food insecurity already has enormous social costs in violent areas such as Jonglei. And these costs could be aggravated in unprecedented ways if the population is exposed to the virus. At the moment, infection rates in South Sudan are among the lowest recorded in the world. But South Sudan has an exceptionally weak health infrastructure and many people are malnourished. Most deaths of children under the age of five happen in Africa, and respiratory infection is the biggest single cause of child death.<sup>23</sup> Many of these deaths are complicated by malnutrition or malaria.

South Sudanese food producers and consumers are moving towards markets. This shift is one of several causes of the country's deepening food insecurity. The processes of commodifying food, labour and land creates winners and losers, and losers are likely to become more dependent on markets for basic foodstuffs, which are mostly supplied by regional producers. If imported food becomes unaffordable or unavailable as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic, South Sudan's social crisis will deepen.

Hungry people without access to land or other productive resources may be forced to migrate in search of food or work or aid. People whose lives are immersed in informal urban economies, and landless rural workers, may need to reorganize their livelihoods dramatically to cope with food and health price inflation. Those with access to land may be tempted to disengage from food markets and focus on production for household consumption, particularly if South Sudan's trading infrastructure—its roads, transporters and markets—is compromised by economic disruption or fears of COVID-19 contagion.

If the availability of imported food decreases significantly, domestic food producers will need to increase supply to the food markets on which so many people depend. But this is not the only challenge that domestic food producers face. Many are reinventing themselves as commercial farmers, and reinventing food, labour and land as commodities. More understanding of the dilemmas and impossibilities faced by food producers and food consumers is an essential part of the response to this new crisis.

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## Notes

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## Credits

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