

DISPLACED TASTES

Trading Grains in South Sudan

Stories of opportunities, shocks and changing tastes

BY JOVENSIA UCHALLA



Men load a truck in the market near Atlabara, Juba. Photo by Silvano Yokwe

Displaced Tastes is a research project run by the Rift Valley Institute in partnership with the Catholic University of South Sudan under the [X-Border Local Research Network](#). The project examines the changing tastes for food in South Sudan in the context of the country's economic transition and place in the regional, cross-border economy of grain.

In the urban centres of South Sudan, people increasingly depend on markets to buy grains imported from South Sudan's neighbours—particularly Sudan and Uganda—for their daily food. While this growing reliance on a cash-based regional economy of food is becoming more evident, much less is known about the lives of the people involved in the grain trade—the traders, transporters and millers—who provide South Sudan's urban areas with staple foods like maize, sorghum and cassava.

To understand how grain is traded in South Sudan, and who by, Jovensia Uchalla examines the life stories of South Sudanese and foreign grain traders, transporters and millers in Juba. These stories talk of opportunities, shocks and changing tastes. Over the past half-decade, risks have risen and smaller traders have taken over from bigger ones. Most of the people discussed in this article moved into the grain trade after they suffered a shock in their previous jobs or shifted positions within the grain trade from drivers and loaders to millers and wholesalers.

Emmanuel, a grain trader from Juba

Displacement and trading opportunity

Emmanuel is a Juba local in his mid-thirties. He first started working as a lorry loader in the Kakuma refugee camp in north-west Kenya, near the border with South Sudan and Uganda. This was during the latter years of the (Second) Sudan Civil War (1983-2005) when many southern Sudanese sought refuge outside of their conflict-affected home areas. Over a decade, Emmanuel built a career unloading lorries and recording food supplies imported from Uganda and Sudan, or brought in from other parts of Kenya to feed the refugees living inside the camp.

After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, Emmanuel returned to Juba. He used his previous experience in Kakuma to find work in Juba's grain markets of Sherikat, KonyoKonyo and Gumbo. After a while, his cousin gave him a more secure job as the manager of a recently purchased grinding mill. This enabled Emmanuel to improve his standard of living: he was able to afford school fees for his children and bills for health treatment. Emmanuel now runs a franchise of grinding mills across two other urban centres in Central Equatoria where he grinds groundnuts, *sim sim* (sesame), maize and cassava. He has also set up a shop to sell locally produced cassava from Yei, Mangala and Magwi.

Emmanuel uses his previous experience to handle grain imports from across the region and caters for a diverse customer base—South Sudanese, Ugandans, Kenyans, Nigerians and Sudanese—all attracted to South Sudan by the economic opportunities offered by its frontier economy. Emmanuel's customers process their home-grown and locally produced and imported maize, sorghum, millet and cassava at his mills.

Edward, a former hunter from Mangala

Insecurity and changing livelihoods

Edward is a miller working in KonyoKonyo market in Juba. He came to the milling business eighteen years ago after he was displaced from his village to the north of Juba. He described his life as 'a hunter in a village called Mangala, where I could go deep in the bush and kill wild animals for my home consumption. In case of surplus, I [sold them] in the market'.

Edward came to Juba, where he 'ran to ... for safety', after the displacement of village members by gunmen. However, he described how at first in Juba 'survival was difficult' until he got a friend who 'asked me to work in his grinding mill, which I accepted, and this is where I continue to work until today'.

Edward says that he has observed a decrease in the quantity of grains and tubers people bring to him for grinding: from big quantities like sacks to small quantities like a bucket or two buckets per person. He estimates that he processes eight to ten buckets of sorghum; five to six buckets of maize; and four to five buckets of cassava a day.

Both Emmanuel and Edward described how new food interventions are reshaping tastes in Juba. They also spoke about the changes that have been occurring by mixing different types of grains and tubers to produce a tastier, more palatable and affordable flour¹. Emmanuel said: 'In the past, people have been consuming specific types of grains, but now the majority of households, retailers and restaurant owners have changed from consuming one type of grain to mixing all types of grains and cassava'.

Oyet, a miller

From trading to milling

Oyet, a miller in his late thirties, began his career in the grain trade driving a pickup truck belonging to a Sudanese businessman, bringing grains and other local products from the three regions of South Sudan to Juba. Like Edward, the hunter turned miller from Mangala, Oyet also changed the nature of his employment due to insecurity following the outbreak of South Sudan's civil war in December 2013. He 'experienced a

terrible attack from rebels along the roadside of Yei in 2015. [After this happened] I shifted from driving to milling local grains, maize, and cassava’—reasoning that a more static role, requiring fewer riskier journeys, would be safer.

Oyet explained how, as a miller, ‘my conditions of work changed’ for the better. No longer having to undertake long, insecure travel overnight, ‘worries are no longer there’ and his per capita income has also increased. This has enabled him to more reliably pay his children’s school fees—like many other families, he sent his children to school in Uganda—and manage other essential expenses, such as health-related costs. Life as a miller provides Oyet with a more reliable, secure income than his previous role in the grain trade.

Mahmud, a Sudanese driver and transporter

Trading despite insecurity

Mahmud is a Sudanese trader who has been navigating South Sudan’s internal and cross-border trade routes for many years through his family-owned transport business. Mahmud imports grains from Uganda and Kenya to Juba and then spreads his goods across the country, maintaining trade routes between Juba and Bor, Juba and Rumbek and Juba and Mundri. Over the years, Mahmud has learned that the grain trade in South Sudan follows a seasonal clock: ‘Transportation of grains varies from season to season. In the dry season, supply of grains increases. In the wet season, supply of grains decreases due to road problems’.

Like Oyet, Mahmud has personally experienced South Sudan’s infamous road insecurity. It was on the Juba to Mundri route that Mahmud and his elderly father narrowly escaped ‘road bandits’ who shot at their car when they were transporting grains. Mahmud’s father sustained serious injuries. Although it made them more conscious of the security risks involved in cross-country trading, this has not deterred the father and son from continuing to transport grains across South Sudan.

Dut, a self-employed transporter

Trading imported grain

Dut has spent a considerable part of his life in the grain trade and started his transporting career working for a big Sudanese transport company in Khartoum. After a few years of learning on the job, one year into the 2013-2019 conflict Dut set himself up independently in South Sudan—pointedly naming his transport business ‘Abilities Co. Ltd’. He explained: ‘Since I have started this business, the condition of my work has changed simply because in Khartoum I was working as an employee and now [I am] a manager in my own company’.

Dut brings in unprocessed maize and maize flour, sorghum, millet and potatoes from Uganda and trucks these around the country. He measures transporting costs in US dollars and ‘predictability’ levels, estimating that it costs three to four times as much to move goods around South Sudan than to bring them into the country. South Sudan’s road network is limited and poorly maintained and Dut, as a South Sudanese transporter, is not immune to the insecurities, illicit taxation and road-blocks faced by foreign traders.

Both Dut and Mahmud reflect on the fact that over the past years, the transport business has come to depend increasingly on transportation assignments by humanitarian organizations, which truck in grains for food aid from neighbouring countries. These experienced transporters observe that many traders are discouraged and seek out other regional markets outside South Sudan instead of taking the risks that define the cross-border trade into South Sudan and its internal trade routes.

Job, a Ugandan trader

The market decides

Job, who is from Uganda, is a grain trader living in Juba. To set up his business he earned starter capital by selling second-hand clothes and eventually began renting a shop in KonyoKonyo market in 2006. Over the years, he established connections with farmers in Torit and Yambio, in Central and Western Equatoria respectively. He has also tried his hand at growing vegetables and grains.

In the years after the civil war started in 2013, Job found that he was not able to rely on his Equatorian suppliers as many of their crops were destroyed during episodes of active violence and farmers were displaced from their lands. His own farming experiment also came to nothing when his farm became inaccessible due to insecurity. Today he brings all of his goods in from across the border with Uganda. Job's customers keep requesting local grain varieties, but end up buying the imported grains which are available in the urban markets. Local farming systems have only recently begun to be oriented towards markets and insecurity hampers the efforts of local farmers to supply these. As a result, many townspeople rely on imported food instead, which is changing South Sudan's food cultures and tastes.

These life stories paint a picture of a gendered trade in grains: men run the larger transport businesses that bring bigger quantities of grain into South Sudan from neighbouring countries and redistribute these to urban centres in South Sudan. Women are involved as traders but generally trade smaller quantities and, when conflict dynamics allow, source their grains locally. Men operate the mills which process raw grains. Women sell grains at open-air stalls in the market. The following life stories focus on three women operating in the grain trade.

Grace, a middle-aged grain trader

Dollars and humanitarian imports

Unlike some of the younger traders who have ended up in the grain trade as a response to recent conflicts and other events, Grace, who is in her late forties, has been involved in the trade since the early 1990s. She has a long view of the fast-changing grain markets in Juba. Grace began selling grains and tubers in the early 1990s when her tamiya (falafal) business could not sustain her and her family any longer. Grace describes how she 'shifted to this business that I am doing now, selling grains and dry cassava ... because there was demand for the grains and tubers. That helped me to start doing it'.

At first, in the 1990s, it was quite successful as 'things were cheap and easy to get'. However, now that most grains are imported from outside, which requires amounts of hard currency that are difficult to obtain for Grace, things are more challenging. Grain imports now account for a significant proportion of traded grain in South Sudan, and that means that grain traders need access to US dollars to participate successfully in the South Sudan grain trade. Because of this, Grace now runs her business at a loss.

This increasing reliance on foreign currency points to the cross-border nature of the grain trade and a growing dependency on Ugandan imports. It is also connected to the devaluation of the South Sudanese Pound, which many economic analysts argue is one of the direct results of civil war. Renewed conflict has also opened up a new source of grain trade for Grace: she exchanges the Ferterita—a kind of sorghum often grown in Sudan—which the World Food Program (WFP) hands out to inhabitants of the Protection of Civilian site in Juba, for other grains of choice and then resells the humanitarian grain in KonyoKonyo market.

Margret, a trader and importer

Responding to insecurity

Margret, who trades in imports and locally grown grains and tubers, brings the Mayo variety of sorghum from Owinykibul, in Eastern Equatoria, which she purchases from soldiers, and cassava from Yei and Kapoeta. Since the restart of conflict in 2013, she has observed more difficulties on the roads from the South Sudan-Uganda borderlands to Juba, including many illegal checkpoints requiring payments to pass through, and attacks by ‘unknown gunmen’.

Margret complains that the Owinykibul-Juba route is a particularly difficult route to negotiate and because of the costs and risks involved in bringing sorghum from this area, it is barely profitable for her. This shows how small traders who want to bring South Sudanese products onto the urban markets are increasingly pushed towards Uganda by localized conflict dynamics and the insecurity they experience when travelling off the relatively better-protected main roads. A growing number of Ugandan farmers are taking advantage of this and are growing sorghum to be transported across the border for the South Sudanese market.

For small merchants like Margret, the grain trade has become a more complicated field. To get their goods to Juba they have to deal with many different actors, including transporters, brokers, custom officials and loaders. To make this easier, Margret explains how traders group together to transport their combined loads more efficiently: ‘I don’t bring goods in tonnes but we combine with other people and hire a vehicle. Each person will be required to pay a specific amount of money ranging from SSP 25,000 or SSP 35,000. After importing we sell in retail to the consumers’.

Florence, a young trader

Markets changing tastes

Florence, a young and ambitious trader from Eastern Equatoria, came to the grain trade for pragmatic reasons: ‘Grains are dry and are durable. I can easily store them and they can’t get spoiled quickly’. Over the past years, she has set herself up as an independent importer and wholesaler of Ugandan maize, sorghum, millet and vegetable seeds. Even though Florence acknowledges that different social groups in South Sudan have their unique ‘ways of eating’ and ‘cultural norms and traditions that limit the type of grains one can eat or like most’, she describes how markets cannot currently cater to these cultural foods. Although she sells small quantities of South Sudanese sim sim (sesame), which she buys from farmers in Magwi, she decries the absence of South Sudanese goods in the markets:

The preferred indigenous grains, such as millet and finger millet, are not available because they are grown in small quantity and cannot supply the whole country. That is why we turn to supplement them through importing from outside.

Florence, however, also recognizes that experiences with displacement have changed the taste patterns of South Sudanese and she traces today’s grain desires to a ‘mindset’ people learned growing up in South Sudan’s neighbouring countries. She explains that ‘most South Sudanese who grew up in Khartoum prefer goods from Khartoum ... whether [they are] good or bad’. They generally see goods that are imported from Uganda to be of lower quality. Florence says that she imports grains from Uganda so that ‘whoever wishes to buy can buy...I believe not all South Sudanese grew up in Khartoum.’

Conclusion

The millers, transporters and traders interviewed for this paper were mostly small players in South Sudan’s new cross-border grain trade. Their stories are important because they show how deeply the cross-border grain trade is reshaping their lives and the way they manage risk—and at the same time, reshaping the foodways and tastes of their customers.

Over the past eight years of insecurity and war, these small traders have become part of a complicated system for managing food supplies to South Sudan’s burgeoning urban centres, although it remains a challenge for them to quantify cross-border trade, and there are no official statistics to rely on. While traders import grain into South Sudan from its powerful and often interfering neighbours, they also try to bring South Sudanese grains to market too—despite the insecurity in rural areas, which inhibits production and trade. These efforts are shaping dependence on markets full of imported grain.

Notes

¹ The evolution of food preferences in South Sudan are explored further in Deng Kuol, Edward Thomas, Elizabeth Nyibol, Jimmy Pitya, Jovensia Uchalla, LoesLijnders, Luga Aquila and Steven Amosa, ‘South Sudan’s Changing Tastes: conflict, displacement and food imports’, Rift Valley Institute, June 2020. (<https://riftvalley.net/publication/south-sudans-changing-tastes-conflict-displacement-and-food-imports>)



Credits

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