

## Briefing Paper

# Is there a youth livelihoods crisis in South Sudan?

### Key points

- South Sudan is in a state of profound economic transition, heavily influenced by conflict and large-scale population displacement and return. This transition has fundamentally changed the way in which people live, particularly their relationship with work and money.
- The end of the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983 – 2005) brought with it a wave of societal reconstruction and a rush of international investment, creating new aspirations and opportunities for young people in higher education, waged employment and government.
- The civil war that started in December 2013 interrupted these efforts, fuelling a growing economic crisis, inflation and depreciation that destroyed investments, the government sector and rural education systems. Opportunities have become even more centralized in towns and cities.
- Young people, particularly women, have generally suffered disproportionately as they try to navigate this rapidly changing and often exploitative political economy. Many are stuck relying on marginal work in agriculture, construction or market trading—seeking cash to pay for expensive education and healthcare.
- Young men often have little option but to engage in armed work, whether that is criminal activity, part of the state military apparatus, or in opposition militias and community protection groups.
- Decades of livelihoods programming since the 1970s has attempted to support non-violent employment and economic security, particularly for young people. Major investments were made in this area during the reconstruction period (2005-2013). But there is little institutional memory of, or reflection on, the long-term outcomes of these programmes.
- One major weakness of livelihoods programming is its general failure to take into account the impact of structural economic changes on livelihoods options. Instead, programmes have focused on relatively superficial solutions, rather than attempting to address the root-causes of the problem.
- The position of young people in South Sudan's economy needs to be better understood through collaborative research. This includes the shifting power dynamics and inequalities within labour markets and the new social structures that cut across previously accepted gendered and generational norms around power and decision-making.

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## Economic and political precarity

Since independence in 2011, young people across South Sudan have faced increasing pressures on their livelihoods. These vary across economic geographies, but often include:

- Land alienation (including a growing rural as well as urban land rental market);
- The impact of continued inflation (and occasional hyperinflation e.g. in 2015) on crucial imports, including medicine, and the rising costs (and decreasing availability) of basic and higher education;
- A widespread lack of investment capital;
- Increasing pressure on natural resources affected by climate change, environmental degradation, displaced people's resettlement, and land privatization or seizure;
- The risks of accessing farm and grazing land, including the risks of raids and predation by local militias or military posts.

These changes have created various forms of insecure tenure and production across rural South Sudan, and made older forms of self-production too risky to rely on. A young woman, living and working in Mayendit village in Lakes State, explained how her family expended its cattle wealth to help them weather local conflict and displacement in the 1990s, and now need cash to pay for basics, like clothes and school fees. Poverty-level agro-pastoral self-production is too risky to rely on without a financial safety net. As one young woman interview for the project said, 'the harvest might not be in good condition, and at the end of the day, you have got nothing, and your family will face serious hunger.'

Since December 2013, securely paid government employment and foreign investment have collapsed. Young men and women have built innovative rural, urban and migrant strategies for making money, generally involving travel and trade. These often require challenging risk management, as well as extensive physical and mental effort. A young man, now living in Torit, noted that: 'in my village people walk for six hours on foot to reach Torit... [to] work in the restaurants washing dishes and serving customers in the market.' Even migrant urban job options now do not pay above the poverty level.

Seasonal migration to towns is a major pathway for young men and women across South Sudan who seek access to cash-work for investing in their own primary and secondary education, in small businesses, meeting health care needs of their extended families or in their siblings' education. The collapse of quality rural education is a key driver of seasonal urban migration, as un/under-paid qualified teachers have left to seek better employment in urban areas or refugee camps.

Salaried employment options have drastically reduced since the outbreak of a new civil war in December 2013, with the collapse of the private sector and government salaries. There is a growing private security sector, but this generally pays extremely badly and is plagued by stories of abuse and wage theft. Humanitarian and development sector agencies are generally the only financially viable waged employment left in many areas. The other option, particularly for young men, is military (armed) employment. Young men from better-off families often try to use their connections and bribery to get deployed in the few remaining personally profitable sectors of the military and police, such as payroll, customs and immigration sections where revenues continue to provide salaries. Other young men are recruited in rural areas by local politicians as 'community police', or as personal bodyguards in Juba.

The economic collapse and political crisis has deepened competition, nepotism and employment discrimination, especially by class, gender and ethnicity. These class and social divides are complex. The combination of the growth of a market economy and the deep economic crisis since 2013 have created some opportunities for a small middle and upper class, unevenly distributed across ethnic groups and regions, to profit at the expense of a large underemployed and precarious young workforce. Young women and men across the country emphasize that South Sudan's economy has increasingly become unequal, manipulative and violent.

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Research also evidenced changing aspirations and decisions among young men and women because of this crisis. Many supposedly non-violent work options (like fishing and cattle-herding) had become risky, due to land disputes and raiding. Like urban gang robberies, rural cattle raiding is now a necessary economy for young men, including graduates, seeking investment capital for education, business and marriage.

Especially since 2013, young women have travelled to towns or market villages to find work and stability for their children. Women of all ages have increasingly engaged in market work, alcohol-brewing, tea-selling and restaurant industries as a means of sustaining their families and supporting their siblings in schools. While this has created new forms of financial independence and, for some young women, changed the balance of power between themselves and patriarchal authorities at home, market work often involves serious social stigma and the risk of sexual harassment.

Incomes from cash-in-hand work on commercial farms, paid cattle herding, and urban daily market work have all stagnated despite inflation and depreciation, to the benefit of employers using cheap labour. Few employment rights or standards are observed. Some young people, young men in particular, seek justice for employment abuses through customary courts, but this is expensive and time consuming.

### **Social networks and safety-nets**

Young people's use of social networks, increasingly those managed via the internet, are important for their successful navigation of this changing political economy. This is the case across the country and in urban and rural locations, amongst education and illiterate women and men.

Social networks, both online and through phone and friendship networks, provide essential knowledge-sharing about risks, tips and opportunities. Widening friendship networks is essential for survival, especially when young people change their location, which is very common. Young people create savings systems, share loans and give emergency cash, and provide accommodation and advice for new arrivals.

Communication over Facebook, mobile phones and WhatsApp have also increased young people's abilities to organize independently, and hidden from, authority figures like family elders. For example, phones have made raids much easier to coordinate and have moved this coordination into more private spaces away from the eyes of local authorities and community leaders. However, these new tools can be over-emphasized. Many areas of cattle-raiding and inter-ethnic violence have not had access to phone networks, and news about military recruitment or militia mobilization still spreads quickly.

Many young people see the changing economy as a distinct new age of youth independence. This is a generation of 'self-service', of 'being alone' and of 'social media'. Migration and social organization in towns encourages pushing back against family demands and decisions. This does not necessarily mean there is a generational divide or an inter-generational crisis. Instead, there are complex cross-generational and cross-regional tensions and connections. Parents and families, including in remote rural areas, remain important to migrant young people, who communicate and send money home when possible.

### **The use of livelihoods interventions**

Current and past external support for livelihoods—often funded by international donors—are barely noted by young people in their discussions of support and assistance programmes. This is a striking omission that suggests fundamental weaknesses in the design of these interventions.

When asked to identify the barriers for their livelihoods and economic development, most young men and women emphasize that there are few options for economic reform or better pay and livelihoods while 'selfish people' retain their tight control over South Sudanese communities, monopolize the economic system, and exploit conflicts for their own advantage. Most international recommendations for livelihoods interventions are essentially at odds with these young people's core interpretation of the structural issues of South Sudan's economy. Current policy on livelihoods interventions are generally liberal individualist, arguing for entrepreneurship, economic diversification and skills investment, individualized microfinance, and the

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formalization of market systems—the creation of state rules and regulations ostensibly to prevent abuses.

These market systems, including waged farm work or market trading, have increased economic insecurity for the majority of young people in the face of inflation, devaluation, market volatility, climate change, land privatization and shifting local conflicts. Young women and men emphasize that common entrepreneurship focused livelihoods interventions fuel competition within these markets and do not take into account these fundamental realities.

Young people commonly say that that continued livelihoods investment models, including formal employment and higher education in towns, and basic agro-pastoral skills, tools and micro-loans support in rural areas, will likely perpetuate and exacerbate growing class divides and tensions among young people and between urbanized and remote rural communities.

## Recommendations

Livelihoods-based approaches that target young people in South Sudan urgently need to be reviewed. In doing so, new programmes could do the following:

1. Address the disparity between urban and rural educational opportunities for young people. Education interventions must both acknowledge and challenge the concentration of educational and employment opportunities in towns. This includes investing in rural education and teacher training, and potentially funding rural scholarships to university or higher education colleges.
2. Provide and support opportunities for more young people to participate in local government. Young people want to openly discuss the economic crisis and confront leaders directly about the structural inequalities and conflicts the crisis is causing. The successful Akobo Model of local government should be revisited, bringing young men and women from urban and rural areas into county government infrastructure reconstruction.
3. Support cooperative economic models that draw on previously successful approaches. Collective economic action may help strengthen mutual solidarity and support young people to work together to confront forms of exploitation as a group, rather than fighting for survival and opportunity by themselves. Interventions could revisit cooperative models and learn from past failures and successes: for example, brick making, agricultural collectives or fish and shea butter farms. This approach might also help challenge the individualist entrepreneurship language that alienates many young people and (among other factors) encourages ethno-local hostility and competition.
4. Review microfinance initiatives and look at collective financing opportunities. Individual microfinance often leaves people more dependent on fluctuating markets and uncertain returns to service personal debt, contributing to deep economic precarity. Collective investments and funding might support cooperative models designed locally to suit specific climatic and economic situations.
5. Provide legal support for employment rights through local and customary court systems. Casual and low-paid workers are poorly supported by the centralized state system of law courts. Instead, they are more likely to seek redress for employment-related issues through the network of local and customary courts, which are less likely to be able to implement state employment legislation. However, to their advantage, they already have an established caselaw developed from previous litigation over unpaid wages, unsafe conditions or injury at work. Collaborative and locally organized consultations with courts and litigants could help to establish worker protection standards based on local legal practice and community-specific needs and would help identify local employment abuses.
6. Collaboratively review and revise initiatives and funding mechanisms for livelihoods projects. This process should include youth leadership and national NGOs, which are often led by young people with extensive knowledge of local economic dynamics. A participatory and accountable process

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of reviewing and revising livelihoods programming in partnership with national NGOs would better address questions of cost-effectiveness and accountability, and better align livelihood support with international commitments in the Grand Bargain towards localization.



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