Pastoralism, Conflict and Recovery in South Sudan

On 15 April 2016, the Norwegian Refugee Council, with support from the Swiss Development Cooperation, hosted a roundtable discussion on pastoralism, conflict and recovery in South Sudan. During the two-year conflict, an unprecedented number of cattle have been separated from their owners, often through the violent raids that have contributed to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people. Alongside horrific levels of violence, the targeting of assets and livelihoods has been a characteristic of the current conflict. When the violence subsides and people feel safe to return home and rebuild their communities, they will likely seek to resume their agro-pastoral livelihoods as well.

Complex cycles of revenge violence and retaliatory cattle raiding may accompany the return or post-return period. To prevent or mitigate future cattle-related conflict, and to prepare effective programming, there is a need for collective analysis about what to expect and how best to respond. The international community, in general, has not had a systematic approach to programming within pastoral communities. This has meant that avenues for deepening resilience, supporting the sustainability of coping mechanisms, and communal recovery have not been sufficiently integrated into response options. A lack of adequate information, analysis, and advice is one gap created by an emphasis on immediate emergency relief programming on the one hand, and development that prioritizes service provision in settled areas and agriculture, on the other. To address this gap, NRC convened a multi sector discussion on the state of the pastoral economy in the current conflict context to better prepare the humanitarian community to address potential protection and conflict concerns and program more effectively for agro-pastoral and transhumant community resilience and recovery.

This brief policy paper was developed through the roundtable meeting of experts and reflects the key points of the discussions as well as recommendations for the broader international community. The paper was drafted by the independent consultant who also facilitated the meeting.

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1. Understanding pastoralism

Pastoralism is the central institution around which most of South Sudan's societies are organized. There are few substitutes for the cattle economy; cattle are the staple in the order of value, tradition and belief and represent a core thread in the institution of identity. Cattle are social capital. FAO research\(^1\) indicates that South Sudanese rate dowry as the primary benefit of keeping cattle, followed by milk and meat production; cash income; draught animal power for farming\(^2\); and prestige. As outsiders it is easy to equate dowry with a simplistic exchange of cows for women. Dowry is a far more nuanced process of ensuring inter-communal relations and advancing networks of obligation suited to living in extreme uncertainty. Livestock remains the most widely practiced source of income and food in South Sudan with more than 70 percent of the population participating in the pastoral economy. This is not an informal sector of economic activity but rather is the primary sector of productive activity for wealth accumulation for communities of greater Bahr el Ghazal, greater Upper Nile as well as parts of Eastern and Central Equatoria.\(^3\)

Cattle are also political capital as herd size correlates with political and economic success. Not only in terms of cattle as loot but also as a key mechanism for the storage of wealth, pastoralism is a key component of the self-sustaining war economy that we do not know enough about or how to address. For example, during this conflict, more cattle have become concentrated in the hands of elites. These herds are well-protected and within the current insecurity, weapons have been even more widely circulated.\(^4\) Regardless, for most people, wealth stored in cattle is the most reliable way to keep assets. Although the pastoral economy intersects with the cash economy, the lack of availability of banks and the sustained cultural importance of cattle, reinforce the continued necessity of keeping wealth in the herd. Cattle camps are asset houses for socio-political systems that operate in collective forms and through networks of obligation. It is a livelihood system particularly suited to the unique geography and natural resource distribution of South Sudan that requires seasonal mobility, but also to its cultural affirmations.

As exemplified in the graphic below, multiple components of socio-economic and political activity interact with the pastoral economy.

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\(^1\) The Food and Agriculture Organization, 2016. "The Impact of Conflict on the Livestock Sector in South Sudan" by Jacob Aklilu Gebreyes with support from Gezu Bekele Lemma, Luka Biong Deng and Shaif Abdullahi

\(^2\) Draught animal power is the use of animals for tilling fields or carrying loads.

\(^3\) The Government has decreed the creation of 28 states from the previous system of 10 states. This report still uses the names of the previous 10 states as much of the research presented at the meeting was conducted before the 28 states were implemented. For consistency and ease of reading, the names of the former 10 states were used.

\(^4\) See, for example, Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) Arms and Ammunition Tracing Desk Report "Small arms ammunition documented at Bentiu mosque," May 2014
2. Impact of conflict of pastoral livelihoods

Since 2013, South Sudan has faced a situation of extreme insecurity leading many parts of the country to experience an intensified complex emergency. The imperative for sustained emergency humanitarian relief is a function of the type of conflict experienced in South Sudan. While the insecurity is a result of a political crisis, related to socio-economic stress, this manifests on the ground as an assault on the social systems and networks that determine access to political power. When violence in a civil war manifests as a complex emergency, it is indicative of the predatory nature of that conflict in which the destruction of communities is both a goal and means of fighting. Forced asset stripping is part of punishing communities, depriving them of the economic basis of life, preventing them from becoming a political constituency and adversely affecting their survival strategies. It is a means to exert pressure on leadership and serves the long-term objective of preventing future political agitation. Particularly, in southern Unity the linkages between the political dynamic and the scale of cattle raiding cannot be ignored. Across Greater Upper Nile, communities have been practicing advanced means of coping: diversifying income, splitting families, depending on extended relations of kinship, moving cattle to other areas, keeping smaller herds and engaging in cross border trade.

Within the current conflict, the transfer of assets from the politically weak to the politically strong also creates other spillover conflicts with non-pastoral communities due to land pressure and the expansionist nature of pastoral communities. This then shows an interaction between elite politics and local survival. Particularly manifesting in the Equatorian region, mostly herds from Bor Dinka areas are putting pressure on local communities, not only due to traditional agricultural-pastoral tensions but also as the cattle herds are protected by heavily armed young men and belong to senior politico-military elites. This creates cleavages at local level, including for example, the need for communal self defence, but also links local level resource conflicts to the needs and interests of elites.
FAO figures indicate an overall decline in cattle wealth in communities. Before the conflict, better off and middle wealth families owned 12 and 5 times more livestock than the poor. More recent figures show that they now own 3.5 and 2 times more respectively. FAO notes that in the current conflict, the mean herd size of better-off households has declined by 46 percent for cattle and by 52 percent for sheep and goats, and by 59 percent for cattle and by 39 percent for sheep and goats for the middle wealth group. By contrast, cattle holdings of poor households increased by 15 percent, with the median figures showing a 50 percent increase for cattle and a 50 percent decrease for small ruminants. This does not necessarily mean that the cattle population of the poor has increased. Instead, there has been an increase in the cattle population numbers of poor groups as more middle-income people have fallen into this economic category. FAO also report more than 75,000 head of cattle arriving in Western Equatoria from Bor Dinka territories of Jonglei. Although the data cannot measure the concentration of large herds in the hands of a smaller number of elites, it is widely considered that the concentration of cattle by high-level elites is contributing to the overall decline in cattle wealth in communities.

The important point is that there is no “before” to return to as this conflict has dramatically affected the way the pastoral economy functions both in monetary but also socio-cultural terms. When thinking ahead towards the optimism of recovery and resilience, the ability of the pastoral economy to be an effective safety net has been damaged and undermined by changed kin relationships and the damaged socio-cultural fabric created by excessive militarization of the home spaces. This has important implications too for food production as productive land usage dropped dramatically from 72.2 percent to 26.7 percent. Getting back to food security depends on supporting subsistence agriculture but that path to recovery will not be immediate, which in turn puts pressure on other sources of income, most particularly livestock and fishing.

Decades of war have resulted in the militarization of culture and the cattle camp culture in particular. As young men are conscripted to fight in the national conflict, even younger men get drawn into the community self defence structures central to the survival of the herd. Some observers noted that the militarized asset stripping that occurred in southern Unity last year has been a driver of the levels of violence witnessed in the cattle raiding in areas of Warrap and Lakes states since. One explanation could be that young men are so mobilized and incited for violence in the current context that the moral limitations on the use of force are being strained. Exposure to extreme levels of violence will reverberate for generations. This conflict has also reinforced that access to political and economic power is through the barrel of a gun. Wealth and influence can be taken by force. This has implications for the ability of traditional leaders to exert influence on the young men and women who are central to current and future patterns of violence.

Within this understanding, it becomes clear how the pastoral economy has been affected by the current conflict. Patterns of political ascendance repeat within the indicators of the economic health of the sector, both internally and within the region. Exports of cattle from Bentiu to El Obied and from Malakal to Kosti have ceased due to insecurity and border closures, while imports from Uganda dominate the market in Juba. For Uganda, livestock trade has increased by 250 percent for cattle and 1200 percent for sheep and goats between 2013 and 2015.

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5 The Food and Agriculture Organization, 2016. “The Impact of Conflict on the Livestock Sector in South Sudan” by Jacob Aklilu Gebreyes with support from Gezu Bekele Lemma, Luka Biong Deng and Shaif Abdullahi
For people in displacement, the advanced dispute resolution capacities of pastoral communities allow for the suspension of some traditional justice options. For example, issues related to cattle, such as dowry and debt payments, are left for resolution upon return. This is an important part of the future coping strategies: when people return to their rural homes and begin to restock their herds, dowry, debt collection and raiding will be amongst the first means. If such transactions can occur then there are positive spin-offs for social cohesion and recovery. If not, then people can be pushed into violent or illicit wealth accumulation strategies. Although there is anecdotal evidence of how the dowry system has changed by conflict, this is an area that requires more information before interventions are considered. The conflict situation, both because of insecurity and economic decline, has forced people to adapt dowry practices. For example, dowry can be paid partially in cattle and partially in cash for wealthy families. A protection concern is that financial pressure could force families to marry their daughters at younger ages to secure the family’s economic interests. Some communities are likely to lower dowry costs as the overall liquidity of social capital has reduced which could affect inter-communal relations and encourage inter-group marriage.

An additional impact of the conflict on the pastoral system is that access to markets has been altered and, for many people, market access has been strained across geography and kin. In South Sudan, markets function as a result of the social networks that orbit around them. Market connectivity and access is determined by bonding – i.e. access to markets is dependent on social capital exercised through extended familial relationships. Markets also function as a key linkage in the agro-pastoral relationship, which allows surplus livestock to be used to offset sorghum deficits. Animal husbandry is a key link to food security but exploiting such a relationship to its maximum benefit relies on being able to access markets, primarily through kinship ties or paying your way to market access.

Part of the socio-economic disruption that has occurred in the current conflict is that people, especially those who are displaced or in areas of insecurity in greater Upper Nile, are not able to access their usual markets or areas of economic activity. New or pre-existing social networks have to adapt patterns of buying and selling. This has expanded the network of interlocutors that connect products to traders. The expansion of this network not only increases the cost of doing business and decreasing purchasing parity but also creates disincentives for some people and reduces market access for the vulnerable. Thinking about changes in market access highlights that the most vulnerable people in South Sudan are those without extended relationships of kin and with limited stocks of livestock. During the resettlement programs before the independence of South Sudan, women were particularly affected by changes to family structures and access to cattle. For example, vulnerable groups, thus defined, would include widows without family labor to assist with rebuilding tukuls and clearing land and women without access to land rights or who have been divorced during the conflict.6

Paying attention to market dynamics also highlights where liquidity exists in the local economy. For example, cattle trade in Akobo, according to one report, has trickled to one

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cow per month being sold; Uror cattle market has collapsed and Awerial is experiencing a boom with up to 100 cattle per week being sold. Market structures and functions also provide an interesting lens on economic recovery. While the commercialization of the cattle economy could be one way to generate more resilient livelihoods, thinking about cattle as a social asset means looking rather at the livelihoods activities that surround this wealth accumulation activity. Income diversification is commonly practiced but wealth remains stored in the cattle camp. Violence thus functions as a tool to acquire social capital. We need to consider how to support wealth accumulation as part of a broader livelihoods strategy that takes into account the limitations of monetizing social capital.

3. Pastoralism and recovery

One of the key elements of the international response in South Sudan is looking at how to maximize the impact of limited efforts within a consciously aware framework of not aggravating existing tensions. The complexity of South Sudan makes systematic conflict sensitivity difficult to achieve and the only advice that can be put forward is that the international response needs to be modest in its ambitions and humble in intentions. For example, one of the topics discussed during the roundtable was how to support discrete avenues of inter-communal trade without raising the profile of such cooperation and attracting the attention of belligerents. Although progress with implementing the peace deal should enable the recovery of inter-communal cooperation, the likelihood for spoilers to manipulate the peace is high and the levels of violence experienced in the last months may have damaged and altered patterns of cooperation that will require time to build trust again.

There is an uncomfortable reality in South Sudan in that international assistance is essential to keeping people alive but aid cannot restore the balance that this conflict has upset. At best, we can support survival strategies but even this comes at a high-risk in a context where sustenance is a weapon and goal of war. International assistance is going to be most effective if responders are able to increase the effectiveness of the pastoral system without excessive interference in the integrity of that system.

4. What does this mean for international interventions?

For many South Sudanese, peace cannot exist without cattle. But it is amiss to assume that the affects or dynamics of peace, security and cattle wealth are the same across the country. All politics is local. For example, in Lakes State, cattle-raiding is a response to violence and violence is a response to cattle raiding. This mutually reinforcing relationship is as much about local resources sharing as it is about political control in an area in which the courts are over-whelmed and political manipulations have eroded the ability of mechanisms to regulate the use of violence. Too often cattle-raiding is a political activity.

For international actors, there is a problem of legibility when considering pastoral interventions. We know it’s out there and there’s something we need to do about it but doing mobile interventions is difficult and we don’t quite understand what the impacts of our interventions will be. Early recovery, resilience and development tend to prioritize settled populations and often lack the fluidity necessary to be able to support discrete coping strategies. Development tends to reflect an impetus towards modernization meaning that cattle camps often miss out on development inputs and pastoralism is seen by outsiders primarily as a means towards a monetized economy.
It is not surprising then that development inputs have not had conflict reduction outcomes in South Sudan where mobility is the key to success and survival. Looking forward this means that we need to avoid thinking about people returning to their places of origin in terms of what physical structures or services there are at site of return. We need a more holistic approach that looks at all the relationships that tied people to those geographies and enabled their subsistence there. This would mean understanding the relationships that drive conflict and cooperation in specific communities - the political economy of an area, so to speak, and how it ties into areas around it, through inter-personal relationships, trade networks and natural resource usage.

That said, focusing on the pastoral economy provides an entry point for flexible, networked programming that is able to link across all these vital socio-economic and cultural influences. As a programming lens, pastoralism creates opportunities for high-risk, low cost programming but with the potential for massive payoffs in the long run. A focus only on how political power manifests, ignores the central importance of economic power as an access to political arenas within networked systems of patronage. Supporting the sustainability of pastoral economies is a lower-cost but more intensive form of development assistance that could, in all likelihood, be more impactful on the lived experience of South Sudanese than the advanced forms of institution building that have characterized interventions of the past. Working in and through cattle keeping structures grounds interventions in the realities of life for South Sudanese and can avoid some of the pitfalls of political capture that occurs when programming in the more sensitive areas of state security. Truly context-specific solutions for South Sudan do not operate through formal systems and institutions; grassroots and bottom-up programming rests, for most areas of South Sudan, in the cattle camps.

Programming through pastoralism should be considered as a way of doing humanitarian and development work while interacting with and yet avoiding the pathogenic effects of the state. For example, under the new system for sharing ministerial portfolios, the ministries for Livestock and Fisheries as well as for Environment and Forestry are with the GRSS-Kiir faction; Water and Irrigation sits with SPLM-IO and Agriculture and Food Security with other opposition political parties. This provides an avenue for cooperation at the highest political levels and will be an area of intervention where the state apparatus could show quite clearly some peace dividends. But international support to such processes needs to be politically astute and technically sound to make use of this opportunity. The international community should consider how to articulate a change agenda for the pastoral economy, developing a theory of change for this overarching sector and not treating it as a sub-sector or tangential arena of programming.

International support should also consider how interventions in other spheres impact on the cattle economy. For example, at Malakal PoC, UNMISS has reportedly resisted the creation of a market and abattoir close by which impacts not only on people’s access to goods and their ability to sustain livestock trade but also delays their ability to establish essential coping mechanisms. However, as aid is political, caution should also be exercised when providing support to local coping mechanisms as this could increase the exposure to risk and undermine economic inter-dependencies. There is a delicate balance to be pursued which requires increased coordination and more holistic area-based strategies for recovery.

Additionally, experts have highlighted that interventions should not just focus on the commercialization of the cattle economy but should rather look at the livelihoods that orbit the cattle economy and make pastoralism part of the political economy of violence. The focus of our interventions should not only be about translating cows into money but
providing avenues for people to translate money into cows to minimise the pressure to raid.

5. Practically, what does this look like?

☐ Supporting resilience and recovery in the current context needs to be based on lessons learned from support to previous resettlements. The majority of international actors have a limited historical experiential lens on South Sudan whereas most of our counterparts have been through multiple iterations of international support. We do a disservice to the knowledge of South Sudanese and reinforce our arrogance if we fail to accommodate our own best practices. Some lessons from the 2004-2008 resettlement support, included:⁷
   a. People without cattle and kin were most vulnerable in return;
   b. Youth who cannot generate wealth through other means are pushed towards violent means to accumulate wealth.
   c. Cash transfers most successful but once off support was not sufficient, regular intervals of cash injection is probably required
   d. Need to have holistic understanding of resilience and coping to include host communities
   e. Expectations of assistance were not the primary reason for return but lack of assistance accelerated frustration (grievances are easily mobilized as political capital by spoilers)
   f. Land ownership and access to land are essential for food security – this was especially problematic for women and widows whose extended family cannot take care of them. Related to this is the importance of labor support for land clearance and planting as well as support to women with limited familial ties to access land,
   g. Dealing with food security was done parallel to the cattle economy meaning international programming never transitioned away from dependency on food aid; international support has systematically underestimated the contribution of pastoralism to livelihoods
   h. Income diversification and urbanization are likely to continue; need to focus on widening livelihoods options

☐ Rehabilitate market infrastructure with a focus on strengthening entire market systems that address the supply chain and obstacles to market access from producer to consumer

☐ Access and support stakeholders from within pastoral structures as a core constituency, this includes the range of classic civil society actors such as trade associations, youth, elders and women’s networks that have organically evolved as avenues for regulating behavior

☐ Encourage the national security services - police, wildlife and army - and UNMISS to protect peaceful migration corridors. In this regard, there is potential to consider good practice lesson from UNISFA, which has effectively used peacekeeping as a means to mitigate migration-related conflict.

☐ Include cattle herd health as an indicator of vulnerability

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- Improve support to veterinary services – South Sudan has excessively high cattle mortality rates that are a real obstacle to the developing a productive core cattle herd. There is also a core of community animal health workers that can be further supported. There is also need to consider how other international actors can work with existing projects. Some examples include encouraging more forums for engagement and cooperation and finding ways to conduct joint interventions such as awareness raising activities during vaccinations.

- Consider support to traditional courts that will consider cattle related cases on return from displacement. There could be small-scale assistance such as with record keeping and storage of precedents as well as more intensive like infrastructure and legal aid.

- Investigate the potential use of cattle banks – Zimbabwe provides an interesting example where cattle banks were done as part of inflation response and to build rural assets within a politically marginalized community in Matabeleland. Using cattle banks is an innovative rural financing tool which links access to credit with cattle and promotes financial services not otherwise available.

- Prioritize mobile services including health care and education. There are current projects by USAID as well as FAO/UNESCO working on education provision but these seem to be contained to piloting phases and consideration needs to be paid to sufficient scaling and targeting.

- Advance education and training opportunities for people in displacement to enable income diversification and, in particular, urban livelihoods. Pastoral communities have a division of labor that has been disrupted; support to the agricultural production functions will be required.

- Restocking herd wealth requires protection. For many people restocking will take place through income generation, debt collection and dowry. International actors can support non-violent means of restocking, Restocking as gendered impacts. When young men, in particular, are dependent on raiding for restocking, this is an adjunct means of production, which creates new patterns of mobility for youth and changes the socio-cultural balances of power. For women, restocking puts them at risk for increasingly abusive marriage arrangements as they are forced to marry for family’s economic interest or increasingly vulnerable to divorce, especially if herds have been stolen and they do not have any children.

- Consider alternative range management such as growing grasses to control migration and providing adequate water points to contain areas of potential clashes but also for overall good herd health.

- Greater consideration needs to be paid to the linkages between pastoralism and food security as not only do cattle provide milk and meat but also function as an asset to be traded to overcome food deficits. While increasing food security depends on supporting subsistence agriculture, for the majority of South Sudanese, subsistence agriculture is an extension of their pastoral livelihoods and livestock form an essential component of subsistence agriculture as a means of labour through draught to clear fields, for example, as well as operating as a source of income (cattle assets are used to offset food, particularly sorghum deficits) and as a source of meat and milk.

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