



Loaded Guns and Empty Stomachs:

Fixing a food crisis and preventing a catastrophe in South Sudan

April 2014

“We walked five days to escape the fighting in Malakal. Now we are living in a deserted school and unsure where to get food from.” 8 year old boy in Upper Nile State.

The Problem

A major food crisis is currently enveloping South Sudan – endangering thousands of people, threatening to further destroy the gains made over the past five years and testing commitments by governments and the international community as well as lessons learnt from previous crises. This food crisis is very much a product of the conflict, and it requires a bold response to stem the suffering of communities and to repair the fragile food security system.

As one man, aged 60, from Jonglei said *“I harvested four bags of sorghum in the last season (September 2013). With my family of 13, this could have lasted me about six months. I am hosting 4 IDP households from Malakal and Bor. We finished the four bags. I sold my cow and bought an additional three bags which are now almost finished. I have no other assets to sell to buy more food and I do not know what will happen between now and the next season”.*

South Sudan faces three concurrent ongoing crises with (1) an acute humanitarian crisis, (2) a chronic food insecurity problem and (3) an ongoing conflict. OCHA estimates that up to 7 million South Sudanese people are at risk of severe food insecurity in 2014-2015. While many of the impacts will remain unknown until more assessments are conducted, our collective experience in this country and others tells us that women, men boys, and girls often have specific roles in the provision of food for the household so impacts will vary by gender, age and factors such as pregnancy and disabilities. The millions of missed meals will have a large impact on the health and future of South Sudan. We face a familiar choice: respond to a disaster immediately, or respond to an even larger catastrophe later.

In the short term, missed meals are resulting in malnutrition – making people less able to provide for their families, and impeding the ability to physically move to safety through loss of strength and mobility. Older women and men, and people living with disabilities, may have further challenges to move quickly. Women and girls are likely to be primary caretakers for vulnerable groups, including those experiencing the health impacts of inadequate food. The longer the crisis continues, the longer the impact will linger. Children who suffer from moderate acute malnutrition are 2.5 times more likely to die than a well-nourished child if they don't receive treatment, and this increases to about 9 times if the malnutrition is severe¹.

On a broader level, the conflict has disrupted the lives of everyone in South Sudan. Over a million people are displaced: more than 800,000 within South Sudan and more than 270,000 seeking safety in neighboring countries. *This was not supposed to happen.*

Pre-Conflict Situation

Before conflict erupted on December 15th, the food security situation looked relatively promising for many South Sudanese. In a country where 90% of the population relies on agriculture and livestock for food and income, a good rainy season in 2013 was positive news. In November 2013, less than a month before conflict broke out, assessments by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) concluded that national food security was the best it had been in five years. Food security experts predicted that the prices of staple foods would be low and stable throughout early 2014.² Significant cross-border trade with Sudan was expected to return for the first time since independence. In October 2013, 740,000 more people had adequate food consumption compared to October 2012.³

Despite the promising trajectory, South Sudan was still vulnerable to food insecurity on the eve of the conflict, including high levels of under-nutrition. Before the conflict, the FAO estimated a cereal gap of 409,000 metric tons in 2014, and in 2013 more than a third of the population (3.7 million people) did not have enough food to eat. In areas affected by conflict and displacement, such as Maban County in Upper Nile State, the percentage of food insecurity was much higher. Assessments in late 2013 clearly showed that conflict made people less food secure.

¹ Black et al. Maternal and Child Undernutrition 1: "Maternal and child undernutrition: global and regional exposures and health consequences." The Lancet, [Volume 371, Issue 9608](#), Pages 243 - 260, 19 January 2008.

² <http://www.fews.net/east-africa/south-sudan/food-security-outlook-update/sun-2013-11-10>

³ <http://www.fao.org/docrep/019/I3652e/I3652e.pdf>

Post-Conflict: Shattered peace risks lost harvests and herds

With the renewed fighting in December, there is a sense that South Sudan has veered sharply off the path it was on since independence. Hope has been replaced by despair, peace replaced by conflict, and a promising future replaced by disillusionment. The international community has also seemingly been taken aback by the speed of the reversal of progress and is struggling to find a coherent way to respond to a rapidly deteriorating and changing context. It is essential to remember lessons learned from earlier crises, to act immediately and at the scale necessary to prevent a much larger disaster.

For South Sudanese communities and families, the breakdown of social cohesion is felt every day. For farmers, the last few months have been disastrous. With rains underway in the southern regions, and imminent in other places, planting is not on track, and a significant food shortage is anticipated this year. Countless people have already lost cattle due to raiding, disease, and abandonment while fleeing conflict. With 3.7 million people already in need of immediate assistance, this is likely to trigger an even larger food crisis; activities that people usually engage in before the rainy season and in preparation for the lean season have become impossible.

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Planting requires people, seeds and equipment to be in the right place at the right time during the planting season of April and May. This has not happened this year due to conflict displacing people, agricultural equipment being destroyed or stolen, and low availability of seeds due to crisis related consumption. Many internally displaced people now live either in crowded UN bases (about 75,000) or other locations often unsuitable for food production (more than 725,000), making them unable to grow crops and consequently dependent upon food and other aid delivery. The food provided through food aid is often dry food, such as sorghum, which requires significant cooking, so the distribution of fuel is vital. Women are almost always tasked with preparing meals, so dry food that requires cooking detracts from time women and girls can spend on other activities, such as school and vocational training.

While a full-scale famine is not anticipated this year unless the situation deteriorates even further from what is expected, a significant food and nutrition crisis is underway.⁴ This crisis will have a significant short-term and long term impact on communities, families and children in particular. The problem is further compounded by many agricultural extension workers going unpaid, which reduces the support available to communities and increasing their reliance on humanitarian agencies operating in UN bases where South Sudanese have sought safety. This in turn increases the need for more funding for the UN and humanitarian agencies, but the consolidated appeal remains only 30% funded.

Nutrition Crisis Threatening Lives of Children

With falling food production and failing markets, the resulting widespread food insecurity is leading to alarming rates of malnutrition. Malnutrition is associated with significant health risks in people of all ages. Acute and chronic malnutrition lead to vitamin deficiencies, micronutrient deficiencies, and lowered immunity levels; all of these increase susceptibility

⁴ At time of writing roughly 30% of South Sudan is in IPC Crisis or Emergency Phase (Feb 2014); an updated IPC table is expected at the end of April 2014.

http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/ECA_IPC%20Map_Feb2014.png

to diseases, stunting in children, and can ultimately result in death. As children's bodies are still rapidly developing, they are especially vulnerable to the detrimental effects of malnutrition.

January 2014 figures of children with malnutrition treated at feeding centres in Uror (Jonglei) and Maban (Upper Nile) counties were already more than double the figures of January 2013, and many other conflict-affected counties are expected to have similar high malnutrition rates. Children under the age of five are at particular risk. Back in February 2014, estimates indicated that 1.25 million children under the age of five would need immediate nutrition services by June, with the worst cases concentrated in areas affected by the conflict.⁵ In 2013, funding for nutrition prevention and response decreased, as funding initiatives moved away from integration with health funding and towards a food security and agriculture focus. Unfortunately, in South Sudan, the transition between the two initiatives has not been smooth – resulting in a vast funding gap. There are currently insufficient resources to prevent or respond to a widespread nutritional emergency, with only 61 percent of nutrition needs funded for the period of January-June 2014.

The conflict is already exacerbating the chronic food insecurity and nutrition gaps, and the needs threaten to overwhelm the capacity of responders. Without a proper strategy for prevention and treatment of malnutrition cases, an additional burden will fall to health actors to absorb the cases. This will further divert the already overstretched health resources, and will come at a high cost for the people of South Sudan.

Broken Markets and Destroyed Livelihoods

Since the beginning of the conflict in December 2013, local market infrastructure in Rubkhona (Unity), Malakal (Upper Nile) and Bor (Jonglei) were destroyed, businesses shut down, and salaries have been suspended for many providers of basic services such as health care and education. Even in areas where markets continue to function, the conflict severed supply chains across the country. Besides the short term impact, this also impedes the ability of traders to restock enough commodities to last through the upcoming wet season; this means that tens of thousands of people can neither plant nor rely on the markets.

Each lost paycheck means fewer customers for the traders and businesses that continue to operate – deepening the impact and delaying the recovery. This not only affects people earning salaries, but also the wide network of family members and friends relying on each income for financial support. Often a single salary can support more than a dozen people. The conflict also means that more men are absent, which leads to a rise in female headed households adding to women's roles as caretakers and providers of food and water.

Fighting began midway through the harvest season, disrupting the most critical time of the year for smallholder farmers. Large levels of displacement have caused people to abandon harvested stocks and fighting has all but stopped trade flows within South Sudan. Traders are unwilling to take on more risks such as bringing large stocks into insecure areas. Not only does this impact the immediate needs of the smallholders and their families, but it cripples their ability to purchase seeds and inputs for the next season. Due to lack of capacity and security concerns, specific impacts such as war remnants on use of agricultural

⁵ UN South Sudan Crisis Response Plan (January – June 2014), 3 February 2014

land are not known. These breakdowns in longer term livelihoods activities will likely have serious implications on food production, as well as availability and access to land over the next few years. As a result, communities could face years of insufficient food consumption amidst ongoing conflict.

Recommendations

The international community should remember lessons learnt from similar crises in South Sudan and elsewhere, and live up to its commitments by:

- 1. Stopping the conflict.** All those with influence or power must work to end the conflict through a sustainable, negotiated political settlement. This is the only way to enable people to return to their homes (or alternative areas) and rebuild their lives. Donors and humanitarian organizations should ensure that assistance is provided in a conflict-sensitive way in line with Good Humanitarian Donorship principles.
- 2. Immediately scaling up food assistance and nutrition interventions.** Provide fishing equipment, seeds and tools to decrease dependency on food assistance and enable people on the move to subsist and survive. This should be done now, as increased rain will significantly hamper transport. It is essential for donors to sufficiently fund a multi-sectoral strategy, including food assistance, for preventing and treating malnutrition of the most affected children under five and their families. This should include support for community-based management of acute malnutrition.
- 3. Providing more funding for emergency and long-term food and nutrition assistance.** The UN and NGOs have appealed for \$655.2 million to provide food for 3.7 million people through June 2014, but the sector is only 25.4 percent funded. During the scheduled May 20th Donors Conference in Norway, donors should make ending the conflict and food security primary focus areas. In addition, donors and humanitarian responders should consider introducing cash-based responses, where feasible and appropriate, to support and further stimulate markets.
- 4. Providing basic services to communities.** Responding to food insecurity requires a multifaceted approach, including health and agriculture services provided to women and men in all states. Salaries for service providers must continue to be paid to staff carrying out these basic services – even in areas controlled by the opposition.
- 5. Donors must not neglect the more developmental areas of South Sudan.** While all states of South Sudan have not been directly affected by fighting, all have been indirectly affected. While it is understandable that funding priorities have shifted rapidly towards humanitarian response, geographical changes in funding has resulted in agencies pulling out of areas where they were undertaking long term development projects. This could not only jeopardize development gains, but leave secure areas susceptible to the conflict spreading.