

# 'THE FUEL IS US': WATER, OIL AND DEBT ON THE SUDAN-SOUTH SUDAN BORDERLANDS

Nicki Kindersley



February 2025



**Rift Valley Institute**  
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**XCEPT**  
CROSS-BORDER CONFLICT  
EVIDENCE / POLICY / TRENDS

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## RESEARCH TEAM

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The research team collectively conceptualized the project and its methodology. The project researchers were responsible for the investigation and validation. The project lead was responsible for the formal analysis, data curation, project administration, supervision and writing.

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## XCEPT PROGRAMME

This report is a product of the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme. XCEPT brings together leading local and international experts to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the factors that shape violent and peaceful behaviour. The programme carries out research to better understand the causes and impacts of conflict in border areas and their international dimensions. Funded by UK International Development, XCEPT offers actionable research to inform policies and programmes that support peace, and builds the skills of local partners. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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## MAP

Jillian Beryl Luff

## COVER PHOTO

Traders outside Mayom, Unity State, 2024. Credit: Mawal Marko Gatkuoth.

## DESIGN/LAYOUT

Maggie Dougherty

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# MAP



# SUMMARY

- South Sudan and Sudan's borderlands are run by a patchwork of armed authorities. Since early 2019, when opposition forces were effectively wiped out, these zones of control have remained relatively fixed, even as the war in Sudan drew close to the Nuba Mountains. Although there have been changes since the onset of the war—including the redirection of trade routes, workers being unable to undertake the 2023 migrant work season, and the likely further spread of oil pollution—the impact of disrupted oil incomes is only marginally relevant to the borderland's economic systems and public authorities.
- The past 15 years have seen overlapping crises restructure the region's social and economic worlds, with war, floods, droughts and inflation eroding the social and financial security systems of the already poor and newly impoverished. Many have become trapped in camps, towns and drier highlands where taxes, travel costs and rents delimit onward opportunities. Many workers are now forced to make daily calculations of calorie intake and there is a growing dependence on waterlily as a food substitute.
- The poorest refugees and displaced people have been pushed into risky work in growing market economies run on rents and debts. This has resulted in increasingly unequal class relations and wealth systems, prompting some to protest against these exploitative dynamics and others to try to cross back to Sudan for better-paid work.
- All of the above has created a useful labour trap for the extractive commercial economy and its security apparatus, which benefits from a displaced and urbanized population reliant on low-paid piecework. The wage-depressed labour market provides the manpower needed to securitize the oilfields, farms, mines, markets, businesses and compounds, as well as the cheap manual work needed in farms, transport systems and markets, all at a low cost and high returns for investors.
- With now-regular flooding crises, droughts, pollution and pests, sustained access to good land will determine who is able to (re)build family security, and who will remain as low-waged and mobile workers. Increasing land commercialisation and rental markets will propagate absolute claims to land and grazing rights, risking confrontations over the rights to safe life on this borderland.

We have been dying of snake bites, and coolness. We are giving birth to deformed babies.  
So I sing this song to present our suffering.

My song is like in a question form, searching for answers:

*Who opened us the ocean of water?*

*Who is killing our elderly people with water?*

*Who kills our orphans with water?*

*Who is killing our widows with water?*

*Who opened the water that is killing our generations?*

*I asked all the African nations, who is killing us with water?*

*I asked the Christians who opened the oceans, whose water is killing our people?*

*Oh, I know the answer! It is the hatred whose agent is the hunger. Hunger is killing us.*

— Elizabeth Nyanduay Bidiet

# INTRODUCTION

South Sudan and Sudan's borderlands are run by a patchwork of armed authorities. Since early 2019, when Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement-In Opposition (SPLA/M-IO) forces were effectively wiped out, these zones of control have remained relatively fixed, even as the war in Sudan drew close to the Nuba Mountains.<sup>1</sup>

The past 15 years have seen overlapping crises restructure the region's social and economic worlds, creating new class exploitation dynamics and deepening inequality.<sup>2</sup> War, floods, droughts and inflation have eroded the social and financial security systems of the already poor and newly impoverished. As a consequence, they have been driven across the landscape, leading to many becoming trapped in camps, towns and drier highlands where taxes, travel costs and rents delimit onward opportunities.

Climate disasters, taxation and market access, alongside the use and threat of violence, are instrumentalized by the armed authorities operating in the borderlands. War and industrial collapse in Sudan's cities and commercial farms have cut off vital sources of seasonal paid work. Everyday incomes are being eroded by inflation, taxes and new rents, especially for those who have lost access to safe farmland. This has created a useful labour trap for the extractive commercial economy and its security apparatus, which benefits from a displaced and urbanized population reliant on low-paid piecework. More specifically, the wage-depressed labour market provides the manpower needed to securitize the oilfields, farms, mines, markets, businesses and compounds, as well as the cheap manual work needed in farms, transport systems and markets, all at a low cost and high returns for investors.

This, then, is the direction of the political economy in the Sudan-South Sudan borderlands: a rapidly expanding securitized commercial model involving rent markets and investments built on privatized security and a cheap labour pool forced to work in dangerous conditions with few

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1 The South Sudanese Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) was formed in December 2013 when the SPLM/A army and government split into two warring factions.

2 For class stratification research in South Sudan, see Andy Catley, 'Livestock and livelihoods in South Sudan', K4D, 2 December 2018; Nicki Kindersley and Joseph Diing Majok, 'Class, cash and control in the South Sudan and Darfur borderlands', *Third World Thematics* 7: 4-6 (2022), 283-306; and Majak D'Agoôt, 'Understanding the Colossus: The Dominant Gun Class and State Formation in South Sudan', *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 47:2 (2022), 111-143.



rights and little recourse.<sup>3</sup>

With flood waters and pollution spreading, competing demands have arisen for the dwindling areas of safe land. Contracts signed in the late 2000s authorizing mass land sales and leases—during 2007–2010, around 7.6 per cent of South Sudan's total land area was estimated to have been acquired for various projects—potentially remain valid, while more recently established commercial farms and mining companies are looking to take possession of ever greater areas of land.<sup>4</sup> These same lands are often vital for residents attempting to reconstruct their social security and diversified incomes—in other words, their resilience. This begs the question of who is in a position to make decisions about hosting and supporting local people in distress.

The increasing class stratification and securitized monopolies detailed in this report suggest that those who control the growing private investments and flooding management decisions in the borderlands are have the power to determine who is granted the space and capital to survive, and by extension who is reduced to dispossessed migrant labour.

## THE NUBA MOUNTAINS, RUWENG AND UNITY STATE BORDERLANDS

Water, oil, food and people move across the long border between Sudan's Nuba Mountains and South Sudan's Unity State and Ruweng Administrative area. This borderland—which has always been a refuge route for Nuba families and military forces—is now the second most significant route for people moving from and to Sudan.<sup>5</sup> While the war in Sudan between the paramilitary Rapid Support Force (RSF) and the national Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) places South Sudan's central state in a precarious financial and political position, these central wars of positioning have not generally changed the borderland peripheries. Rather, the region's wars over the past 50 years have consolidated localized, border-spanning armed authority and economic systems. These systems have become more entrenched in recent years, and are currently adapting to the effects of the Sudan war; oil production disruption; SAF/RSF violence around the mountains and southern Darfur; and year-on-year flooding and drought. With both the SAF and RSF moving their forces elsewhere in April 2023, the Nuba Mountains region has reasserted its political autonomy under Abdelaziz al-Hilu's non-aligned SPLM-N authority, which is now fighting on multiple fronts.

In South Sudan, Juba-centred incomes have increasingly been redirected away from oil and

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3 See Nicki Kindersley and Joseph Diing Majok, 'Breaking Out of the Borderlands: Understanding Migrant Pathways from Northern Bahr El-Ghazal, South Sudan', X-Border Local Research Network, Rift Valley Institute, November 2020; Joseph Ding Majok, 'War, Migration and Work: Agricultural Labour and Cross-Border Migration from Northern Bahr El-Ghazal, South Sudan', X-Border Local Research Network, Rift Valley Institute, 2021; Luga Aquila, 'Child Labour, Education and Commodification in South Sudan', Rift Valley Institute, 2021.

4 David K. Deng, "'Land Belongs to the Community": Demystifying the "Global Land Grab" in Southern Sudan', Land Deal Politics Initiative, 2011, 5–6. [www.eur.nl/sites/corporate/files/LDPI\\_WP\\_04.pdf](http://www.eur.nl/sites/corporate/files/LDPI_WP_04.pdf).

5 Irina Mosel and Leben Nelson Moro, 'Conflict-Sensitive Returns and Integration in South Sudan', CSRF, March 2024, 8.

latterly oil-backed loan revenues towards other extractive exports. Along the border, however, the reworking of Unity and Ruweng's economic foundations has taken somewhat longer. In Unity, like many other states, revenue-generation has been devolved to military commands and ostensibly civil authorities, which from 2014 to 2016 involved government-backed but self-funded raiding wars. These consolidated pro-government authority over Unity State, while devastating the economic and social foundations of opposition-supporting communities. Since 2019, the borderland from the Nuba Mountains to southern Unity has settled into relatively clear taxation territories under a series of public authorities.

Residents here understand this borderland system, which has been shaped by oil pollution, floodwaters, roads and smuggling routes; the barrack sites of different armies; and various paper-issuing and taxing authorities. Here, it is worth noting that the region's military commanders have careers, loyalties and bases rooted in the 1990s wars. Since then, populations and economies have been reshaped in the wake of the 2007 Mayom floods; the start of the Nuba Mountains war in 2011; the rapid growth and (since 2016) partial defunding of a constellation of camps and supply towns; the southern Unity raids and community destruction seen in 2014 and 2015; and the sustained conflicts on the Warrap borders.

From 2019 onwards, there has been wave upon wave of ecological disaster. This includes oil pollution and cyanide poisoning caused by gold mining in Dilling in 2019 (sparking protests on both sides of the border); floods in Rubkona and across Ruweng's refugee camps in 2021; then further massive flooding across the whole region in 2022.<sup>6</sup> Next, 2023 brought an early drought to the border areas and Nuba Mountains, quickly succeeded by flooding in Abiemnhom's refugee settlements, locust destruction in the mountains, and finally cycles of heat waves and flooding across the region.<sup>7</sup> Most recently, the floods seen in 2024 have wrought immense devastation. In sum, droughts and floods are pushing pollution and people ever further across the landscape, undermining families' social and economic foundations, destroying investments and creating disabling risks.

The research upon which this report is based asked borderland residents (refugees, displaced people and those still on their own land) how economies, political power and support networks are being reworked under the conditions outlined above, and what this means for people's futures across the Nile Valley. Drawing on these findings, the report explores the changing margins, rents, income strategies and class dynamics that have emerged across the borderlands,

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6 Female restaurant owner from the Nuba Mountains, Rubkona town, 16 May 2024; male sorghum and onion trader from Sudan, Rubkona town, 20 May 2024; female water point coordinator from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 4 June 2024; female Nuer tea seller, Bentiu town, 21 May 2024; male Nuer traders' union leader, Mayom New Market, 31 May 2024; male Nuer wheelbarrow worker, Rubkona town, 15 May 2024; male Nuer farmer and vegetable garden owner, Nhial Diu area, 22 May 2024; male Nuer returnee from Khartoum, Rubkona town, 16 May 2024.

7 Male health worker and Nuba Mountains refugee, Ajuong Thok camp, 24 May 2024; group of male farmers from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024; male Nuer farmer and vegetable garden owner, Nhial Diu area, 22 May 2024; group of male and female farmers from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024; male casual worker from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 24 May 2024.

all of which are tied to fast-growing tensions over safe land and water.

In doing so, the report addresses a missing link connecting political and humanitarian concerns over the borderlands. While humanitarian analyses focus on the problems of emergency assistance and access to land in a context of massive funding cuts, political analyses debate whether the post-oil shift towards a predatory tax-checkpoint economy is sustainable. What links these two perspectives is the response and availability of labour. What work are people turning to in order to survive in this changing land? How do rising taxes get paid? What work are people investing in, and where, now that better-paid migrant work options in Sudan are no longer available or at least extremely risky?

These are key questions for borderland residents. Deep frustration at unemployment, especially among school and university graduates from both sides of the border, have led to increased cattle raiding and inter-community violence, peaking in February–April 2022 between Koch, Mayendit and Leer youth. Moreover, perceived unfair hiring practices by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has played a part in young people from both Unity and the Nuba Mountains attacking their offices. Thus, the question of work links the changing landscapes, livelihoods and systems of public authority across the borderland.

## RESEARCH METHODS AND REPORT STRUCTURE

Research for the report was carried out during May and June 2024 in Bentiu, Rubkona County and the protection of civilians (PoC) site in Mayom County, as well as across Yida, Ajuong Thok and Pamir refugee camps and their surrounding towns. The lead researchers led a majority-women team in interview-based and observational social research, meeting market workers; farmers; wild food, thatch and wood sellers; traders, transporters, water and food sellers; restaurant and warehouse owners; wholesale and long-distance traders; casual labourers and paid farm workers; school teachers; NGO stipendiary volunteers and salaried staff; ex-combatants formerly belonging to various militaries and militia groups; and camp and local government authorities. In total, the team conducted 101 formal interviews with over 160 people, representing a roughly even gender balance and representation of people with physical disabilities.

The research was driven by a core question, tested for sense in translation: in Nuer, *tek yen idi?* (how do you live?—in the sense of making a living, surviving), and in Toro, *am nya lat ee anyee?* (how do you make a living?). Participants were asked how their experience of making a living had changed over the past 10–20 years, as well as in the past year specifically, and about the pressures they have to navigate. Their answers together provided a wide-ranging picture of life in the borderlands based on a gender-balanced, age-diverse set of experiences.

The research coincided with the start of the rainy season, allowing the team to observe the impacts of rising waters on people's decisions and the practicalities of travel and work across the borderland, including navigating the paperwork and permissions processes of multiple

authorities. Time and researcher safety limited the geographical scope of the research. In addition, many interviewees were keen to avoid discussing local security arrangements, which was respected by the team.

As mentioned, the borderland's military authorities have been relatively stable since opposition forces were wiped out across Unity State by 2019. The first section details the construction of these zones of control since 2013, together with the systems of taxation and trade routes that have been organized. The second section explores how labour systems have changed over the past 15 years of targeted violence and climate disasters, which have led to ever deepening inequality and expanding impoverishment. Building on this, the third section turns to the key question of space, exploring how newly-poor refugees and displaced people are dependent not on decreasing aid, but markets and rents in urbanizing spaces. Finally, the conclusion sums up the report's key themes and offer some policy recommendations going forward.

# BORDERLANDS CONTROL

The borderlands region has been heavily securitized by a network of armed authorities since 2019, creating a patchwork of economic territories and administrations. While these authorities have managed to maintain control since the Sudan war broke out in April 2023, this does not mean the borderlands are peaceful.

In 1980, the Sudanese government carved out Unity as an oil field state, and since 1983 the state and its borderlands have been the site of near constant military confrontation, especially since the oil fields reopened and production intensified from 1997.<sup>8</sup> Like other regions of South Sudan since the 1990s, powerful cliques have used militia organization to expand their economic fiefdoms and political power. Most prominent among the figures involved are Unity State's wartime governor Joseph Nguen Monytil Wejang, from the Bul Nuer; formerly Riek Machar-aligned Taban Deng Gai, from the Jikany in Guit; and Paulino Matiep Nhial, also Bul Nuer, who built a military and economic hub in Mayom and northern Unity in the late 1990s with the South Sudan Liberation Army (SSLA), before emerging as leader of non-SPLA armed groups around 2005. Following Matiep's death in 2012, his sons have maintained his empire, as has his ostensible successor, former SSLA commander Matthew Puljang.

Meanwhile, Taban Deng has ricocheted between Salva Kiir and Machar factions depending on the strength of his support base in Unity, and has built commercial investments in Mayom at Manga. As Unity governor, Taban Deng ran a disarmament campaign in 2010 that violently targeted the Bul Nuer. In response, Bapiny Monytil, Carlo Kuol (also Jikany) and James Gai Yoach (from the Leek) rebelled against Taban, later joining Peter Gadet in Western Nuer in 2011, along with the nephew of Prophet Gatdeang, Matthew Puljang (also Bul, from Nyang Maloh of Kwach like Bapiny and Nguen). In July 2013, Taban Deng was dismissed as governor by President Kiir and replaced by Nguen Monytil, who retained military capacity from his warlord days.

The civil war in December 2013 split the Nuer in Unity roughly along the lines outlined above, with 4,000 of the 11,000-strong SPLA 4th Division in Bentiu organizing under Peter Gatdet with support from chiefs and *gojam* armed youth across Panyijar, Mayendit and Ler.<sup>9</sup> These rebel forces briefly took Bentiu and Rubkona, leading to a halt in oil production that did not resume until 2016. In response, the SPLA 3rd Division from Northern Bahr el Ghazal retook Mayom,

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8 Joshua Craze, Jérôme Tubiana and Claudio Gramizzi, 'A State of Disunity: Conflict Dynamics in Unity State, South Sudan, 2013-15', Small Arms Survey, 2016, 27.

9 The *gojam* are armed Nuer cattle guards organized into a militia in 2014.

Abiemnom, Bentiu and Rubkona in January 2014.<sup>10</sup> Nguen Monytil then launched a series of massive campaigns into southern Unity using the 4th Division's autonomous special division from Mayom, JEM and newly-formed Bul Nuer militias (by 2015 called the '*ter chuong*', justice fighters).<sup>11</sup>

This formed a frontline from west to east, with government offensives during 2014 and 2015 pushing southwards into Koch, Leer, Mayendit and Panyijar, leading to an estimated 10,000 civilians being killed. This, combined with several waves of forced recruitment across the region, deeply damaging intra-Nuer relations. By the end of 2015, 140,000 people had fled to the PoC site at Rubkona, while Bentiu had been repeatedly destroyed.<sup>12</sup> The South Sudanese government took advantage of these horrific raids to secure a series of advantages, including the impoverishment of the SPLM/A-IO's foundations of support; the provision of raid loot as pay to loyal Bul Nuer militias; the financial consolidation of a narrow political class, including via land expropriation, large exports of raided cattle and taxes on bounties;<sup>13</sup> and renewed control of Block 5 oil production at Leer in central Unity, which resumed production in 2021. The fact the Dinka of Pariang and Abiemnom supported the government in the civil war has exacerbated divisions over land claims and political rights in Unity, despite long histories of intermarriage and coexistence between Dinka and Nuer communities in the state.

It was from this position that Kiir's government reconstructed control over Unity and Ruweng. Dividing South Sudan's ten states into 28 in late 2015, Kiir appointed Nguen Monytil as governor of Northern Lich, and two figureheads with little local support as governors of Ruweng and Southern Lich. By 2016, the SPLM/A-IO factions had lost both military and political power, and in July splintered, with Taban Deng rejoining Kiir's government. This alignment was critiqued by many Nuer using the term '*Nuer Wieu*'—the Nuer of Dinka money.<sup>14</sup> By October 2016, about 100,000 refugees from the Nuba Mountains were trapped in Ruweng, including in the new Pamir refugee camp, leading to north-eastern Ruweng becoming an aid hub.<sup>15</sup>

Since 2016, the increasingly powerful and militarized National Security Services (NSS) under Akol Koor, as well as Military Intelligence and various commands of Kiir's South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF), have benefited from profitable areas of control across the region.<sup>16</sup>

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10 Craze, Tubiana and Gramizzi, 'A State of Disunity', 52–62.

11 The Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) is an armed rebel group in Darfur.

12 Craze, Tubiana and Gramizzi, 'A State of Disunity', 8–10.

13 Small Arms Survey/HSABA, 'The Body Count: Controlling Populations in Unity State', Situation Update, August 2023, 3; Joshua Craze, 'From Petrodollars to Licenses: South Sudan's Post-Oil Political Economy', *Environment and Security* (10 August 2024): 10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27538796241262351>.

14 Naomi R. Pendle, 'The "Nuer of Dinka Money" and the Demands of the Dead: Contesting the Moral Limits of Monetised Politics in South Sudan', *Conflict, Security & Development* 20/5 (September 2020): 587–605. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2020.1820161>.

15 Craze, Tubiana and Gramizzi, 'A State of Disunity', 10.

16 The SSPDF was the new name given to the SPLA in 2017.

The NSS formed a militia consisting of young men from the Panaru Dinka around Pariang's oil fields. Alongside the SSPDF's 4th Division and funded by the Greater Pioneer Oil Company (GPOC), these forces secured the Paloich oil fields in Upper Nile.<sup>17</sup> Government-sponsored raids continued throughout 2022, including on the SPLA-IO cantonment at Mirmir and against citizens in Leer.<sup>18</sup>

To the north of Ruweng, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) has retained steady control over large areas of South Kordofan province. Although leader Abdelaziz al-Hilu is rumoured to be willing to broker a deal with the SAF if they take Khartoum in the current fighting, the group has settled into a relatively securitized area of the Nuba Mountains and fought back against the SAF and RSF near Kadugli and Debebad (north of Dilling). The Jau-Kadugli and Jau-Kauda roads were crucial trade routes during the 1983–2005 Sudan civil war, following which the Joint Integrated Unit barracks on the border provided a reserve base for SPLA-North forces based in the Nuba Mountains, as well as a key source of military salaries throughout the 2000s.

These areas went on to be used as SPLM-N supply routes when the Nuba Mountains war started in 2011, while the 2012 conflict at the Heglig (Panthou) oilfields prompted large-scale local military mobilization across Unity. The Nuba Mountains war started in June, during cultivation season, prompting a large number of people to move southwards to Yida, 12 miles inside the South Sudan border, where the refugee camp was repeatedly bombed by the SAF. This and other pressures on the camp prompted aid agencies and the South Sudan government to encourage refugees to relocate to a new camp at Ajuong Thok in 2013, and then to Pamir camp a few years later, both of which were 'demarcated for security personnel to monitor'.<sup>19</sup> The Commission for Refugee Affairs (CRA) was formed by Yida, Ajuong Thok and Pamir camp residents in 2013 to represent the Nuba authorities in South Sudan.

**The Sudan border crossing** at Jau, on the road from Nanyang to Troji, was in the process of being formalized during the report's research. Travellers need permits from the authorities in the area they are travelling from. The border at Jau is quite tightly controlled, primarily by the South Sudan government, with the SPLM-N taking part in a mutual permit system.<sup>20</sup> The Yida camp CRA issues trader and travel permits northwards. To the east, between Jamjang and Liri, the South Sudan government is responsible for issuing permits to the Sudanese traders entering Jamjang town and its surrounding camps. In theory, these traders should carry SAF papers issued at Liri. Due to changing frontlines and high costs, however, many traders are 'winging it'

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17 The forces answered to Stephen Dieu Dau, then Minister for Petroleum; Craze, Tubiana and Gramizzi, 'A State of Disunity', 74.

18 Small Arms Survey, 'In Nguen's Long Shadow'. Accessed 1 October 2024, [www.smallarmssurvey.org/body-count-controlling-populations-unity-state/in-nguen-long-shadow](http://www.smallarmssurvey.org/body-count-controlling-populations-unity-state/in-nguen-long-shadow).

19 Male NGO field protection officer, Yida camp, 10 June 2024.

20 Male health lead from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 8 June 2024; male NGO finance officer, Yida camp, 12 June 2024; male chairman for the Nuba Mountains refugees, Yida camp, 6 June 2024.

from Talodi. In practice, this means paying whatever armed authorities they encounter on the way south to Liri, and then either avoiding Liri via smuggling routes or obtaining a permit from the Liri traders' union in order to cross the border southwards. As a group of Nuer fisherman observe: 'There is mixed authorities and we fear taking the legal procedures. We come like that and in case they find you, you pay them money and be free'.<sup>21</sup>

The South Sudan side of the borderland falls under **Ruweng Administrative Area (RAA)**, created through President Kiir's 2017 decree re-dividing the country's 28 states into 32, and eventually formalized in the return to ten states in February 2020. The establishment of RAA, which kindled numerous new border conflicts, followed lobbying from Padang (Alor, Paweny, Panaru) Dinka political leaders in a relatively unsuccessful attempt to secure a degree of autonomy from powerful Nuer political control within Unity State. Until early 2023, Johnson Olony's holdout SPLA-IO Agwelek faction retained control of eastern Ruweng in Wunkur, with sporadic clashes with the SSPDF's 4th Division displacing many into Bieh and Pamir camps. Having decamped to Juba, however, Olony rejoined the government in June 2023, leaving eastern Ruweng relatively stable and therefore the focus of most of the region's humanitarian jobs and resources.

In the far west of Ruweng, the road running through **Abiemnhom** down to Marial Bai and Kuajok represents a crucial supply line for goods and government supplies arriving from Bahr el Ghazal and Juba, despite recent Bul Nuer raids launched from Mayom in Unity State. In the south-west, at Manga on the River Nam and through Guit County, former Unity State governor Taban Deng Gai has built well-secured investments in his home area.

The port at **Manga** is a crucial supply route for goods from Juba, and since 2012 Taban Deng has both built large commercial farms himself and licensed land to other commercial farming enterprises. The area is claimed by the Dinka Panaru of Pariang County as their side of the River Nam. The borders of Rubkona, Guit and Parang are all disputed, not least because they cover these crucial trade—and therefore tax—corridors. For example, Wangkei in Mayom County, on the border with Rubkona, has been a contested tax-collecting site for well over a decade. In 2010, a Mayom head chief was killed after Wangkei people began building houses in disputed areas, and sporadic fighting has continued since then.

The **oil corridor to the Panakuach border crossing** and Aliiny has been tightly controlled by the SSPDF's 4th Division since it moved into the area in late 2019 under then-deputy commander Carlo Kuol Ruai. In 2021, the 4th Division occupied the disputed former SPLA-IO base at Panakuach itself, as well as Rotriak, an area contested between the Leek Nuer of Unity's Rubkona and Guit counties and the Dinka of Pariang and RAA. This has effectively split RAA into two areas. The border crossing at Panakuach is now formally open under the control of the 4th Division and the NSS, alongside armed Leek Nuer cattle herders who have moved into the higher, dryer land available in what has been a Nuer militia-held area since the 1990s. Rotriak,

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21 Five male Nuer fishermen, Gany river, 22 May 2024.



on the disputed Rubkona border with RAA, has since been designated a relocation site by Unity State for those displaced by the 2021 flooding and the 2023 Sudan war—as of September 2024, the site had a population of around 44,000. Both the 4th Division and the NSS self-fund their work from border taxes and (especially the NSS) oil industry securitization.

## TEN YEARS OF SCORCHED-EARTH GOVERNANCE

The construction of military fiefdoms has allowed violent stability to be established across the borderlands, a process that has included fortification of the SPLM-N's Nuba Mountains territory against both the RSF and SAF. In Unity State, authorities have achieved this stability through constant grinding violence against dissenters and political rivals.

Ongoing reshuffles in the Unity and Ruweng state authorities have played out in recent years between various factions tied to the historical territorial authorities of Taban Deng and Paulino Matiep, as well as newer powers associated with Tut Kew—Kiir's well-networked security advisor and the adoptive son of Riek Machar. For example, in April 2020, Matthew Puljang Top was removed as head of the 4th Division's special division by Tut Kew and Unity governor Nguen Monytil in their consolidation of Bul Nuer political authority. Nevertheless, Puljang was soon rehabilitated as head of the 4th Division's military production, which placed him in charge of the division's agricultural investments. In June 2021, as part of the removal of now weakened SPLM-IO-aligned politicians from the area, RAA's chief administrator William Chol Awalith was sacked by Kiir and replaced with Peter Monyjok Dau. In May 2024, Kiir again replaced the RAA's chief administrator, and a month later promoted Matthew Puljang to commander of the 4th Division.

The most significant of Kiir's May 2024 decrees was his replacing of powerful but much-hated Unity governor Nguen Monytil with Riek Bim Top, a lawyer and security actor with no previous political position but a close familial link to Paulino Matiep. As well as continuing the Presidential Office's manipulation of competing Bul Nuer political interests, the appointment of a new governor provides an opportunity to rebuild the government's reputation. Riek Bim has since been on a charm offensive, ordering the *terchuong* militia to disband in July 2024, and over the following two months paying visits to Rotriak, Mayom, Guit and, most significantly, Leer and Panyijiar in southern Unity. *Terchuong* leader Captain Matuiy Gatwich Top was arrested, released and then recruited back into the SSPDF's 4th Division—*terchuong* members who were already on the books within the 4th Division have since returned to military service. These changes have not significantly affected the relatively stable extractive systems built under Nguen—including his personal investments—even if competition over control of revenue incomes continues.

## THE TAX AND DEBT ECONOMY

The past ten years of violent securitization have provided excellent conditions for the rapid accumulation of wealth by those in a position to invest in this method of governance. This is

most explicit in Rubkona and Bentiu towns, where investments in hotels, warehouses, transport companies, shop buildings and residential homes (including those abandoned by people now residing in PoC/IDP camps) since the destruction of the towns in 2013 have created a busy rent economy. Oil field sites, refugee/IDP sites, transport junctions and supply towns (such as Jamjang for Yida and Ajuong Thok camps) create wells of demand and resources, including alternative formats for militia incomes via security companies and 'police' provision.<sup>22</sup>

This economy of rents, tax and debt is now extensive, helped significantly by the monopoly effect. Those with both incomes and armed power—whether state, military or militia—are able to build investments; control their markets through the checkpoint economy and siting of refugee/IDP camps and government offices; and both tax their customers and provide them with paid security. Local agricultural products (vegetables, house poles, wild food) and sorghum are the only goods not to face taxation unless brought across state lines. Otherwise, charcoal, cattle and livestock trades, brick making, fishing, money transfer companies—indeed, all other industries—face taxes.<sup>23</sup> As officials from the Sudanese traders' union observe: 'We are taxed from the moment of uploading, to the destination of where the goods are taken to, depending on the checkpoints and your luck'.<sup>24</sup>

A wide tax base has developed across the market system, invested in by all authorities.<sup>25</sup> Traders' union offices in key towns offer advice to their members on how to navigate this economy. In Rubkona, for example, the union charges SSP 1,700 (USD 0.34) per week for this, on top of the SSP 1,000 taxes collected by the Joint Operations unit and an additional SSP 1,000 collected by the revenue authority. A Nuer trader explains: 'We also have another group—whose name I forget—we pay them SSP 500. And they all come with different letters. Some are official, and others we doubt them. But it seems the government in the county knows all these groups'.<sup>26</sup>

The study's research attempted to create a snapshot of this taxation economy.<sup>27</sup> On the Sudan border, Sudanese Arab traders pay SSP 30,000 per day for trading at Liri, and SSP 50,000 per day to trade in the Pamir mobile market that runs during camp food distributions.<sup>28</sup> Along the route from Pamir to Ajuong Thok there are usually four or five checkpoints to pay taxes at, and displaced Nuba traders working at Pamir each month are also taxed SSP 50,000 to work

22 Small Arms Survey, 'In Nguen's Long Shadow'.

23 Disabled male Nuer ex-SPLA soldier, Mankien market, 10 June 2024.

24 Two male officials from the Sudanese traders' union, Ajuong Thok camp, 27 May 2024.

25 Investigation of this involved very risky work by South Sudanese researchers; see Peer Schouten, Ken Matthyssen and Thomas Muller, 'Checkpoint Economy: The Political Economy of Checkpoints in South Sudan, Ten Years after Independence', DIIS, December 2021.

26 Male Nuer trader and sorghum seller, Chilaak, 23 May 2024.

27 The following discussion has been cross-referenced as far as possible, and represents a snapshot of May–June 2024. For reference, USD 1 = SSP 5,000.

28 Male trader from Talodi, Yida camp, 6 June 2024; male camp chairman from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024.

in the market.<sup>29</sup> At Yida camp, each shop pays a profit tax every four months of SSP 200,000, regardless of the size of the business.<sup>30</sup> At the Nuba Mountains border route to Yida, a goat is taxed at SSP 5,000 and a cow at SSP 10,000, which limits the amount of meat available in Yida.<sup>31</sup>

At Ajuong Thok camp and the nearby supply town of Jamjang, businesses pay ground rent on their plots, a weekly health tax, a fire inspection fee, shop rent for buildings, and a yearly profit tax.<sup>32</sup> A Jamjang restaurant owner servicing mostly World Food Programme (WFP) workers says she pays SSP 200,000 a month in various taxes and SSP 50,000 for rent—the level of tax being high in her case because she is a refugee working outside the camp.<sup>33</sup> For wholesale traders taking goods onwards from the Sudan border, truck hire costs about SSP 2 million from Jamjang to Mayom and back, or SSP 1 million for a Land Cruiser. One trader said that over the course of a May 2024 trip involving a Land Cruiser full of onions transported from Sudan they had to pay about SSP 500,000 at checkpoints.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the county finance department at Mayom takes a 7 per cent sales tax, while the agriculture department taxes the milk, rice, soap and onion trades.

By the end of 2022, many traders at Rubkona were starting to pool resources in order to transport goods from Yida and Jamjang.<sup>35</sup> Since May 2024, Sudanese traders and refugees who want to work in Rubkona have had to pay a monthly SSP 50,000 immigration fee (previously SSP 35,000). This must be paid even by manual labourers, making leaving the camps prohibitively expensive for most workers.<sup>36</sup>

In the west, at Jokrian and the border town of Mankien, traders are charged 5 per cent on profits by the revenue authority, while the security services charge SSP 5,000 per small carton of saleable goods bought to trade.<sup>37</sup> Fuel traders work the border from Warrap's key town of Wunrok through Abiemnhom to Mayom, hiring motorbikes at SSP 100,000 to carry ten jerrycans a trip. From Wunrok to Mankien the checkpoints charge SSP 2,000 per 20 litre jerrycan, then SSP 5,000 onwards to Mayom.<sup>38</sup> The county finance department also charges SSP

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29 Group of male traders from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024.

30 Male trader from Talodi, Yida camp, 6 June 2024.

31 Three male traders from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 7 June 2024.

32 Two male officials from the Sudanese traders' union, Ajuong Thok camp, 27 May 2024.

33 Female restaurant owner from the Nuba Mountains, Jamjang town, 31 May 2024.

34 Male Nuer traders' union leader, Mayom New Market, 31 May 2024.

35 Male Nuer wheelbarrow worker, Rubkona town, 15 May 2024.

36 Male trader and head of Sudanese traders' union, Rubkona, 18 May 2024; male chairperson of the Nuba Mountains community at Rubkona, 17 May 2024; four male casual workers from the Nuba Mountains, Rubkona town, 17 May 2024.

37 Male Nuer market trader, Jokrial, 5 June 2024.

38 Male Nuer fuel seller, Mankien, 3 June 2024; male Nuer fuel seller, Mayom market, 31 May 2024.

2,000 per boxed item in Mankien's shops.<sup>39</sup> Traders using cars pay significantly more: around SSP 50,000 per checkpoint at Mayom.<sup>40</sup>

From Mankien to Rubkona, goat traders are charged SSP 500 per goat at each checkpoint, of which there are about five or six en route. Canoe transport off-road was taxed SSP 2,500 per goat in 2022. Now, many traders avoid the risk of water transport, as if they lose a barge they lose everything.<sup>41</sup> Cattle traders face similar taxation trading to Bentiu. Local authorities in rural areas around Mayom charge SSP 2,500 per cow purchase, receipted, with the seller paying a SSP 1,500 transaction tax. Long-distance traders buy movement permits at SSP 150,000 in Mayom, before travelling to Bentiu via the Tuomuor tax collection point.<sup>42</sup> Overall, bringing a truckload of goods from Juba to Rubkona costs about SSP 10 to 20 million (USD 2,000–4,000) per truck in checkpoint duties alone, including about SSP 20,000 per checkpoint just for crossing with the vehicle.<sup>43</sup> Sorghum sacks brought from Renk on boats are cheaper at SSP 250,000 each, with 50 kg wheat sacks costing roughly SSP 200,000. This method of transportation is hugely risky, however: recently a 2,047-sack boat burned in Malakal, inflicting huge financial losses on the affected traders.<sup>44</sup>

In Rubkona, sorghum is taxed from the IDP camp to the town at SSP 1,500 per sack, plus a transport fee of SSP 500 for the trader.<sup>45</sup> One printing shop in town pays (mostly) weekly taxes to ten different government units, including SSP 500 to the fire brigade, SSP 500 to the city council and SSP 1,500 to the Joint Operations unit.<sup>46</sup> Bricklayers renting land for clay extraction used to pay SSP 2,000 per week in tax, but this was suddenly raised to SSP 10,000 during our research.<sup>47</sup> At Bilnyang, on the Gany River, which is designated an administrative border, fishermen have to pay 'both governments' either side of the river, with each demanding a daily fee of SSP 500.<sup>48</sup>

Town tea-sellers are charged about SSP 1,000–2,000 daily by various government units, and restaurants SSP 2,500 per day.<sup>49</sup> If the tax is not paid then a plastic chair is held ransom at a fee of

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39 Male Nuer fuel seller, Mankien, 3 June 2024.

40 Male Nuer traders' union leader, Mayom New Market, 31 May 2024.

41 Male Nuer trader and sorghum seller, Chilaak, 23 May 2024.

42 Male Nuer cattle trader, Mabil, 4 June 2024.

43 Male trader and head of Sudanese traders' union, Rubkona, 18 May 2024.

44 Male sorghum and onion trader from Sudan, Rubkona town, 20 May 2024; male trader and head of Sudanese traders' union, Rubkona, 18 May 2024.

45 Male Nuer trader and sorghum seller, Chilaak, 23 May 2024.

46 Male Nuer market stall owner, Rubkona, 25 May 2024.

47 Female bricklayer and school student from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 13 June 2024.

48 Five male Nuer fishermen, Gany river, 22 May 2024.

49 Head of Nuer women traders in Rubkona, 15 May 2024.

SSP 8,000, although one tea seller had recently managed to negotiate this down to SSP 5,000.<sup>50</sup> As one restaurant owner complained, 'If you don't pay, they will close up the restaurant'.<sup>51</sup>

This wide terrain of rents, tax and debt is run not only by military authorities but all levels of local government. Commodity trading taxes and controls allow the borderland authorities to create systems of dependency and marketized security. Traders and rural producers now need to pay high up-front costs for ostensible protection and basic market access. This creates systems of debt, not just in terms of plastic chairs held in hock, but the high costs of production and trade incurred by goods before they can reach the market.

### WHAT HAS CHANGED WITH THE SUDAN WAR?

The past 18 months of war in Sudan have driven four key changes in the borderlands. Firstly, and most dramatically, is the **redirection of transit routes and imports**. Food and goods imports are now coming from the south, mainly from Juba via Warrap and Manga's river port.<sup>52</sup> Only small amounts of farm products are coming across the border from Muglad and Karasana, largely limited to the dry season via auto-rickshaw. The prices of Sudanese goods have doubled, with a sack of onions now costing SSP 380,000–400,000 at Ajuong Thok.<sup>53</sup>

While the road from Liri down to Yida is safe, having been securitized by the SPLM-N and South Sudan government, the route to Liri—from Kosti to Al-Jebia in the mountains, then on to Talodi using auto-rickshaws—is very risky and expensive.<sup>54</sup> Now it is mostly just Darfur and Sudanese Arab traders who take these routes as wholesalers, with rains preventing their use over July to October.<sup>55</sup> The other option is to bring goods via Renk over water.<sup>56</sup> The cattle trade has also changed direction: traders who previously moved cattle on foot and sold at Lubeit for good returns have now started using trucks to go to Ajak Kuach cattle market and on to Wau. As a result, they face greater risks of robbery and higher checkpoint prices.<sup>57</sup>

The direction and costs of fuel imports have also been affected. Some fuel used to come via

50 Five female tea sellers and migrant workers from the Nuba Mountains in Rubkona, travelling from Ajuong Thok camp, 16 May 2024.

51 Female restaurant owner from the Nuba Mountains, Rubkona town, 16 May 2024.

52 Male Nuer NGO protection officer, Bentiu, 15 May 2024; male head of the Nuba traders' union, Yida camp, 7 June 2024.

53 Male trader and head of Sudanese traders' union, Rubkona, 18 May 2024; two male officials from the Sudanese traders' union, Ajuong Thok camp, 27 May 2024; female restaurant owner from the Nuba Mountains, Rubkona town, 16 May 2024.

54 Male trader from Talodi, Yida camp, 6 June 2024.

55 Female Nuer song expert, Mankien, 6 June 2024; female head of Nuer women traders in Rubkona, 15 May 2024; male Nuer traders' union leader, Mayom New Market, 31 May 2024.

56 Male Nuer fuel seller, Mankien, 3 June 2024.

57 Male Nuer cattle trader, Mabil, 4 June 2024.

small traders from Abyei's Amiet market, but clashes in Amiet in 2023 made the road too dangerous.<sup>58</sup> Fuel now comes primarily from Wunrok and Wau, while prices have risen steeply due to inflation: a 20-litre jerrycan at Mayom currently costs SSP 130,000, compared to SSP 40,000–50,000 in 2018. In the best-case scenario, buyers may be able to purchase 20 litres directly from Somali long-distance fuel truckers for SSP 120,000 at Wunrok.<sup>59</sup> Given that those transporting fuel from Wunrok to Mayom must themselves pay SSP 110,000 per jerrycan, as well as up to 15 rounds of taxes, they make less than SSP 20,000 profit per jerrycan.<sup>60</sup> In the rainy season, costs can go much higher, with motorbike transporters charging up to SSP 200,000 for the round trip.<sup>61</sup>

The high costs of importing goods (including fuel, food and mechanical parts) that now need to come overland either via northern routes or from Juba has been compounded by rising inflation over 2024.<sup>62</sup> Both routes are expensive and carry high risks of robbery and violence.<sup>63</sup> This has priced many regional traders out of the wholesale market, with a trader in Mayom reporting that he could no longer afford to hire vehicles to get up to Yida or El Obeid.<sup>64</sup> Trucks from Juba to Yida cost roughly SSP 5–6 million to hire, on top of the SSP 240,000 needed for the trading licence from Juba.<sup>65</sup> In the wet season, it takes about a month for a truck to come from Juba. In response, traders are now banding together in groups of around ten to collectively invest in a truck they may previously have rented on an individual basis.<sup>66</sup> Car companies offering package deals charge SSP 6,000 per kilo from Juba, while flying goods from Juba costs SSP 9,000 per kilo.<sup>67</sup>

Changed routes and costs have meant **a smaller group of traders is making significant profits**. Traders with more significant investment networks, including Darfuri and East African wholesalers and corporate importers, are able to meet the high costs and risks of long-distance trucking and thus benefit from rapidly rising local prices. By contrast, South Sudanese and Nuba traders forced out of larger imports now increasingly work as local middlemen, pushing prices

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58 Male Nuer market trader, Jokrial, 5 June 2024.

59 Male Nuer fuel seller, Mankien, 3 June 2024.

60 Male Nuer fuel seller, Mayom market, 31 May 2024; male Nuer fuel seller, Mankien, 3 June 2024.

61 Male Nuer fuel seller, Mayom market, 31 May 2024.

62 Three elderly displaced Nuer men, Biemruor, 21 May 2024; two male officials from the Sudanese traders' union, Ajuong Thok camp, 27 May 2024.

63 Two Nuer NGO health workers, Rubkona, 20 May 2024.

64 Male Nuer traders' union leader, Mayom New Market, 31 May 2024.

65 Three male traders from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 7 June 2024.

66 Male trader and head of Sudanese traders' union, Rubkona, 18 May 2024; male sorghum and onion trader from Sudan, Rubkona town, 20 May 2024.

67 Three male traders from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 7 June 2024; two male officials from the Sudanese traders' union, Ajuong Thok camp, 27 May 2024; male Nuer market trader, Jokrial, 5 June 2024.

up further.<sup>68</sup>

At the same time, the Sudan war has created the conditions for even **lower wages and worse conditions for labour** on the South Sudan side of the border. Many Unity residents and Nuba Mountains refugees migrate across the border every June for paid employment in Gezira's farms and Khartoum's factories. These cash incomes are a key part of family economic planning and investments. The sudden halt to this seasonal migration caused by the events of April–May 2023 meant younger men and women migrants—as well as their families—had little time to plan alternative income options. After ten years of war and flooding, the majority of residents had already eaten into or lost their financial reserves. As a farmer called Peter at Nhial Diu explained: 'my cattle and goats were raided in the 2014 crisis. I was left with nothing. Thank God I am still alive'.<sup>69</sup>

The sudden loss of this migrant workforce in Sudan is a key element driving its worsening famine. It also means labour has become extremely cheap in South Sudan.<sup>70</sup> This is pushing people into increasingly dangerous and exploitative work, including tasks subsidizing the now-expensive business of trading. In the dry season of early 2023, some traders from Mayom hired women as porters to carry goods on their heads to Rubkona—a distance of at least 80 kilometres—rather than rent road transport.<sup>71</sup> The next section of the report explores this changing labour market in more detail.

The Sudan war has also disrupted Unity State's oil exports. On 16 March 2024, Sudan declared a force majeure over the Petrodar pipeline from Upper Nile's Melut oil fields, and also decreased exports through the Greater Nile pipeline from Unity's oil fields (partly due to Yemeni military operations in the Red Sea in response to the Israeli invasion of Gaza).<sup>72</sup> On 27 August 2024, oil exports through the Petrodar line were paused until mid-September. It is not the (lack of) oil revenues that is of primary concern for the borderlands, however—financially, there has been limited impacts beyond a small number of employees.

On the other hand, oil drilling effects on the landscape have escalated, and **the war may have created the conditions for new pollution disasters**. Oil spills at the Jau oil fields in the Nuba Mountains, together with continued pollution in Unity's oil fields, have been compounded by flooding since 2021. Major oil fields in Unity State and RAA are now subject to flooding, including their oil wastewater pits and chemical storage. Disruptions in exports—or even the total closure of the Greater Nile pipeline—do not stop extraction, and there are rumours of oil

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68 Male head of the Nuba traders' union, Yida camp, 7 June 2024.

69 Male Nuer farmer and vegetable garden owner, Nhial Diu area, 22 May 2024.

70 Fikra for Studies and Development, 'The Hunger's Grip: The Looming Catastrophe of Famine in Sudan', April 2024, 4.

71 Head of Nuer women traders in Rubkona, 15 May 2024.

72 PAX, 'Oil in the Crosshairs', 4 June 2024. Accessed 24 October 2024, <https://paxforpeace.nl/news/oil-in-the-crosshairs/>.

companies building open-air storage pits for crude oil as an emergency option.<sup>73</sup> Combined with 2024's high flood levels, this has potentially created massive water-borne pollution.

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73 Personal communications of the author with observers; PAX, 'Oil in the Crosshairs'.



# 'THE FUEL IS US': WORK, NEW POVERTY, AND THE WATERLILY ECONOMY<sup>74</sup>

Ten years of sustained violence, economic collapse and environmental crises has eroded the financial and social foundations of most families in the borderlands. Three waves of massive displacement—the Unity wars of 2014–2018; year-on-year flooding from 2020; and the Sudan war from 2023—have driven more and more people towards markets and into camps.<sup>75</sup> This in turn has created sharper social stratification; pushed the poorest into risky labour choices and the verge of famine conditions; and built wider rent and debt economies.

## CATTLE LOSS AND RECONSTRUCTION

'When the situation started to go to ruin it was brought by the water'.<sup>76</sup>

Although the figures involved cannot be verified, research participants consistently emphasize massive cattle losses from raiding, especially in southern Unity during 2014–2018.<sup>77</sup> Since 2020, repeated flooding has also worsened the spread of livestock diseases, as well as killing cattle and animals due to rising waters and herders being unable to move beyond disease vectors.<sup>78</sup> Many families left with one or two cows have been forced to sell them just to cover basic food supplies to ride out the year. Participants described how, out of desperation, one man sold a bullock for SSP 21,000 in 2022, at a time when the going rate in the region was roughly SSP 100,000.<sup>79</sup> That same year, goats were being sold at a low of SSP 35,000 in Rubkona (against an average

74 Male Nuer wheelbarrow worker, Bentiu bridge, 27 May 2024.

75 Male Nuer traders' union leader, Mayom New Market, 31 May 2024.

76 Elderly Nuer farmer, Jokrial, 3 June 2024.

77 Three elderly displaced Nuer men, Biemruor, 21 May 2024; male Nuer farmer and vegetable garden owner, Nhial Diu area, 22 May 2024; Naomi R. Pendle, 'Famine, Access and Conflict Sensitivity: What Opportunities Do Livestock Offer in South Sudan?', Briefing, CSRF, February 2018, 1.

78 Male Nuer teacher, Mankien, 7 June 2024; three elderly Nuer farmers, Jokrial, 3 June 2024; four female Nuer wood sellers and waterlily workers, Mayom, 29 May 2024; two male Nuer ex-SPLA soldiers (one disabled), Rubkona market, 18 May 2024.

79 Male displaced Nuer public toilets operator, Jokrial, 4 June 2024; male Nuer wheelbarrow worker, Rubkona town, 15 May 2024.

of SSP 60,000).<sup>80</sup> Many middle-income and previously financially secure families have become impoverished over the past ten years through their loss of this investment wealth.<sup>81</sup>

Cattle death and significant levels of cattle exports (including cattle raided for sale) have compounded market shortages and thus high prices in Unity markets.<sup>82</sup> At Mayom, a cow now sells for as much as SSP 500,000–1 million, and a heifer for SSP 1.2 million at Bentiu.<sup>83</sup> This likely reflects the retention of war-booty cattle by militia fighters in Mayom, combined with families' attempts to reconstruct their herds by retaining rather than selling cattle. Even so, many families—especially those displaced by flooding or conflict—are still having to sell their remaining cattle for survival, using some of the income to invest in shorter-term market trading in order to gain more rapid access to ready cash.<sup>84</sup>

For many Nuba refugees, it is not worth the risk of amassing cattle or livestock wealth. Refugees often face higher checkpoint costs; are targeted for armed robbery; are threatened or harassed on land donated for their use to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); or struggle to negotiate access to wider pastures. Many Nuba farmers report that farmlands given to them by UNHCR have been seized by local residents, and that their goats and cows have been stolen.<sup>85</sup>

## COLLAPSING INCOMES AND FAMINE MARGINS

In order to better understand the widening economic inequalities seen in the borderlands, the study examined a cross-sample of incomes and self-sustenance systems, from those paid in US dollars to wild food collectors. Reasons of access and researcher security mean it was not possible to discuss personal incomes with senior military staff, politicians and senior civil servants, who (like all government employees) had officially gone unpaid for 9–11 months at time of writing, but in reality are generally able to secure incomes via the investment and taxation systems described previously, often backed by South Sudanese and international business partners with significant dollar-based capital.

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80 Male Nuer trader and sorghum seller, Chilaak, 23 May 2024.

81 Andy Catley, 'Livestock and Livelihoods in South Sudan', K4D HelpDesk, December 2018.

82 Male Nuer traders' union leader, Mayom New Market, 31 May 2024; male Nuer cattle trader, Mabil, 4 June 2024.

83 Male Nuer traders' union leader, Mayom New Market, 31 May 2024; three elderly displaced Nuer men, Biemruor, 21 May 2024.

84 Male displaced Nuer public toilets operator, Jokrial, 4 June 2024; male Nuer wheelbarrow worker, Rubkona town, 15 May 2024; male Nuer fuel seller, Mayom market, 31 May 2024.

85 Female Nuer tea seller, Mayom New Market, 31 May 2024; male Nuer trader and sorghum seller, Chilaak, 23 May 2024; group of male and female farmers from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024; female water point coordinator from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 4 June 2024; five female Nuer farmers and wild food collectors, Mayom, 2 June 2024; female midwife from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 8 June 2024.

Alongside these state- and military-linked investment networks sits a very small minority of **dollar-paid workers** in the humanitarian and oil sectors. Such individuals are often (due to education and income levels, as well as shared interests) similarly invested in trade and business enterprises. Average dollar salaries in these sectors are around USD 400–600 per month.<sup>86</sup> At the lower end of this sector are the ‘incentive workers’, who are technically volunteers, thereby allowing easy hiring/firing and avoiding issues around employing refugees. Experienced incentive workers can get around USD 100–300 per month. By comparison, a watchman at an international NGO hospital is paid USD 45 per week (almost USD 200 per month).<sup>87</sup>

Dollar salaries hold up against constant SSP inflation, unlike the incomes of similarly educated and experienced workers in the **SSP-waged sectors** of private schools and hospitals. Their wages have depreciated rapidly against the dollar: a private refugee school deputy principal and a midwife at Yida hospital both receive a monthly salary of SSP 50,000, which translates to about USD 10 at the exchange rate during research.<sup>88</sup> Meanwhile, Nyieth, a volunteer teacher in Mayom, makes significantly more (SSP 107,000 per month, about USD 20), but has to pay SSP 5,000 for SPLM party registration and a SSP 2,000 fee to receive his salary payment from Juba.<sup>89</sup>

**Self-employed small-scale traders** are more able to manage the impact of inflation on their incomes by factoring it into sale prices, as long as they do not price themselves out of the market. Here, prices go ‘hand in hand with the dollar’.<sup>90</sup> Motorbike workers can make around SSP 50,000 a day, while a Jamjang restaurant owner commuting from the camp makes around SSP 100,000 a day.<sup>91</sup> Elsewhere, Stephen, a local sorghum trader in Chilaak, makes SSP 7,000 and takes home two tins a day.<sup>92</sup> A cigarette hawkker at Jokrial buys a carton of cigarettes at SSP 800,000, before selling its contents over several weeks for a total of SSP 1 million—based on this, his household (himself and his wife) limits its consumption to SSP 6,000 a day.<sup>93</sup>

**Farmers** with access to reliable farmlands, including Nuba refugees who depend on ‘*dukuro*

- 86 Male NGO health worker from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024; male Nuer NGO worker, Rubkona, 4 June 2024; female NGO worker from the Nuba Mountains, Ajuong Thok camp, 24 May 2024; male NGO finance officer, Yida camp, 12 June 2024.
- 87 Male NGO worker from the Nuba Mountains, Ajuong Thok camp, 31 May 2024; male Nuer ex-SPLA soldier and hospital guard, Mayom, 2 May 2024; male health worker and Nuba Mountains refugee, Ajuong Thok camp, 24 May 2024.
- 88 Male senior teacher from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 11 June 2024; female midwife from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 8 June 2024; female NGO education worker from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 5 June 2024.
- 89 Male Nuer teacher, Mankien, 7 June 2024.
- 90 Male sorghum and onion trader from Sudan, Rubkona town, 20 May 2024.
- 91 Male Nuer fuel seller, Mayom market, 31 May 2024; female restaurant owner from the Nuba Mountains, Jamjang town, 31 May 2024.
- 92 Male Nuer trader and sorghum seller, Chilaak, 23 May 2024.
- 93 Male Nuer market trader, Jokrial, 5 June 2024.

*nyidio nyadita*' (farming for consumption), cultivate mostly sorghum, beans and groundnuts in an attempt to balance incomes with food. At Yida, farmers can harvest 4–10 sacks of sorghum, 3–4 sacks of beans and 2–3 sacks of groundnuts per season. Rather than sell by the sack (around 90 kg, which sells at SSP 300,000) and risk inflation losses through holding cash, farmers prefer to sell by the *malwa* (3.5 kg) at the market, based on what they need in order to buy goods themselves: a *malwa* of beans sells at SSP 20,000 in Yida and groundnuts for SSP 16,000.<sup>94</sup> One feddan (4,200 m<sup>2</sup>) of land at Yida might produce three sacks of produce using hand cultivation, or ten with machine cultivation and good fertilizer.<sup>95</sup> Reliable seeds are an issue: a gallon of seeds in Mayom cost SSP 20,000 in 2024, double the previous year.<sup>96</sup>

'Sorghum is becoming another war' due to the fact it is generally an untaxed trade.<sup>97</sup> This has more recently led to steep competition and (for most small-scale motorbike traders) lower profit margins. Intermediary traders buy 50 kg sacks for SSP 100,000 at the refugee/IDP camps, or bigger 90 kg sacks for SSP 180,000 at Manga port. These buyers are generally 'big business people from the counties' who transport the sorghum onwards and sell it at a SSP 10,000 per sack markup. This profit is then taxed.<sup>98</sup> Alternatively, traders sell it in batches locally.

Most other work is now either **daily waged or market work** of various kinds. This includes farm work, with many people—especially women lacking access to their own lands, as well as displaced and refugee people—heading to higher, less-flooded lands at Liri to work on large farms for SSP 4,000 per area. This represents a better piecework rate than further south (although Liri carries higher risks of robbery or harassment by those working at the various military posts at the border).<sup>99</sup> Meanwhile, cattle workers at Mabil earn around SSP 10,000–15,000 a day.<sup>100</sup>

The 2021 floods meant many men turned to intensive fishing for incomes. Fishermen at Bilnyang might catch 30 fish a day depending on the winds and rains, which they then sell for between SSP 100–500 depending on size.<sup>101</sup> Town work varies more in terms of incomes. Casual labour in Rubkona is paid SSP 4000–5,000 per day, while digging holes for fence poles earns SSP 1,000 per hole.<sup>102</sup> Rubkona tea-sellers make about SSP 4,000 daily after costs and taxes, although at

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94 Male chairman for the Nuba Mountains refugees, Yida camp, 6 June 2024.

95 Six male and female farmers from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 5 June 2024.

96 Five female Nuer farmers and wild food collectors, Mayom, 2 June 2024.

97 Male NGO finance officer, Yida camp, 12 June 2024; male Nuer NGO protection officer, Bentiu, 15 May 2024.

98 Male Nuer trader and sorghum seller, Chilaak, 23 May 2024.

99 Two male construction workers who arrived from Sudan in December 2023, Yida camp, 13 June 2024.

100 Male Nuer cattle trader, Mabil, 4 June 2024.

101 Five male Nuer fishermen, Gany river, 22 May 2024.

102 Disabled male Nuer ex-SPLA soldier, Mankien market, 10 June 2024.

Mayom this varies between SSP 3,000 and SSP 5,000.<sup>103</sup> In Mayom, Angelina makes about SSP 20,000 a day selling airtime at her small shop. She also sells SIM cards, making a SSP 3,000 profit on each due to her approach of saving capital in order to buy a full carton of SIM cards at SSP 150,000 for 100 cards.<sup>104</sup>

Elsewhere, Matai, a disabled soldier selling airtime in Rubkona market, makes about SSP 2,000 a day.<sup>105</sup> Simon, another ex-soldier and amputee, is a trained electrician who fixes torches and phones at Mankien market for about SSP 1,000–5,000 per repair.<sup>106</sup> Simon has also been growing and selling mangoes for six years, with his children helping to hawk them on foot for SSP 1,000 each. In the off-season for mangoes, Simon heads to the forests to make charcoal.<sup>107</sup> Disabled military pensions are set at SSP 7,000 per month, with a tax of SSP 500, but have not been paid for nearly a year.<sup>108</sup> Dominic, another ex-soldier, collects plastic bottles to sell to oil and petrol sellers, charging SSP 500 for ten bottles. He sleeps at his granddaughter's tea stall as night-time security in exchange for a morning cup of tea and a loan when he needs it.<sup>109</sup> Some disabled ex-soldiers make small additional incomes through the checkpoint system, earning SSP 1,000 a day writing down the names of inter-town travellers at bus stations.<sup>110</sup>

Those working in Nuba refugee camps and Jamjang town receive similar incomes. Labour for building work makes about SSP 10,000 a day, with disputes over unpaid wages and payments between refugees and residents meaning camp administrators are often called upon to witness agreements/payments.<sup>111</sup> Casual work at the WFP base, unloading trucks and sometimes construction work, pays much more, at SSP 30,000–40,000 a day.<sup>112</sup> Ebal, a young refugee woman at Yida, supports her schooling by brickmaking with her neighbour. They can only make about 40–50 bricks each day due to a lack of water, which they sell for SSP 500 each (an increase from SSP 100 in December 2023 due to the water scarcity in camps).<sup>113</sup>

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103 Male chairperson of the Nuba Mountains community at Rubkona, 17 May 2024; Five female tea sellers and migrant workers from the Nuba Mountains in Rubkona, travelling from Ajuong Thok camp, 16 May 2024.

104 Female Nuer airtime and SIM card seller, Mayom New Market, 30 May 2024.

105 Two male Nuer ex-SPLA soldiers (one disabled), Rubkona market, 18 May 2024.

106 Male disabled Nuer ex-SPLA soldier, Mankien market, 10 June 2024.

107 Male disabled Nuer ex-SPLA soldier, Mankien market, 10 June 2024.

108 Male Nuer disabled ex-SPLA soldier and market worker, Mayom New Market, 30 May 2024.

109 Male Nuer disabled ex-SPLA soldier and market worker, Mayom, 11 June 2024.

110 Male Nuer disabled ex-SPLA soldier and market worker, Mayom New Market, 30 May 2024; Male Nuer disabled ex-SPLA soldier, Mankien, 30 May 2024.

111 Male NGO worker from the Nuba Mountains, Ajuong Thok camp, 31 May 2024.

112 Male casual worker from the Nuba Mountains, Ajuong Thok camp, 24 May 2024.

113 Female bricklayer and school student from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 13 June 2024; two male construction workers who arrived from Sudan in December 2023, Yida camp, 13 June 2024.

Very tight income margins are further squeezed by weekly and often daily taxations on market work and trade. Family investments in farming self-production have become increasingly uncertain as changing rains and river levels create new flooding patterns. The majority of interviewees made SSP 3,000–15,000 a day, not including long-term family investments in farming or livestock—this immediate cash has become increasingly vital for everyday food purchases and basic household supplies. There is no point saving to buy larger quantities of food due to inflationary price rises in the meantime. Instead, investments need to go into trading or livestock, both of which might pay dividends.<sup>114</sup>

The tight margins faced are changing market prices. Meat is expensive, with a kilo of beef now SSP 10,000 at Rubkona and SSP 6,000 at Mankien and Mayom.<sup>115</sup> Many people have instead chosen to buy fish, which has pushed up market prices: a good-sized fresh fish is now SSP 3,000–5,000 at Rubkona and Mayom, while a small fish (for soup) sells at SSP 500.<sup>116</sup> A jerrycan of drinking water costs SSP 700–1,000 from a seller, and a cup of tea is now consistently SSP 500–1,000 (as the sugar costs have gone up).<sup>117</sup> In Mayom, a *malwa* (3.5 kg) of sorghum sells at SSP 14,000 and a half *malwa* (a nyakui, 1.75 kg, perhaps enough to make a family meal) for SSP 7,000–9,000. In Jokrial and Rubkona, the price of the latter is up to SSP 10,000.<sup>118</sup>

Home supplies require further saving, especially when it comes to maintenance during the rains. A plastic tarpaulin sells for SSP 100,000 at Rubkona and SSP 120,000 at Yida.<sup>119</sup> Thatching grass is sold at SSP 4,000–5,000 at Mayom and Yida alike, with roofing poles costing SSP 5,000 and cooking charcoal around SSP 10,000–11,000 for a daily bag.<sup>120</sup> The prices of business supplies are also going up due to inflation and scarcity: a plastic chair that in 2022 retailed at SSP 4,000 in Bentiu now costs SSP 65,000 at Rubkona, with new chairs now hard to find in the market.<sup>121</sup> At

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114 Male displaced Nuer public toilets operator, Jokrial, 4 June 2024.

115 Male Nuer trader and sorghum seller, Chilaak, 23 May 2024; female Nuer airtime and SIM card seller, Mayom New Market, 30 May 2024; five male Nuer fishermen, Gany river, 22 May 2024; Male Nuer teacher, Mankien, 7 June 2024.

116 Male Nuer trader and sorghum seller, Chilaak, 23 May 2024; female Nuer airtime and SIM card seller, Mayom New Market, 30 May 2024; female Nuer tea seller and returnee from Sudan, Rubkona, 16 May 2024; five male Nuer fishermen, Gany river, 22 May 2024; head of Nuer women traders in Rubkona, 15 May 2024.

117 Female Nuer airtime and SIM card seller, Mayom New Market, 30 May 2024; male Nuer wheelbarrow worker, Bentiu bridge, 27 May 2024; head of Nuer women traders in Rubkona, 15 May 2024; female Nuer tea seller, Bentiu town, 21 May 2024.

118 Four female Nuer wood sellers and waterlily workers, Mayom, 29 May 2024; female Nuer NGO worker, Rubkona, 24 May 2024.

119 Female Nuer NGO worker, Rubkona, 24 May 2024; five male and female disabled refugees, Yida camp, 6 June 2024.

120 Head of Nuba Mountains women's association, Yida camp, 4 June 2024; seven children from the Nuba Mountains aged c. 8–15, interviewed with supervising adults, selling wood and grass at Yida camp, 12 June 2024; six male and female farmers from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 5 June 2024; four female Nuer wood sellers and waterlily workers, Mayom, 29 May 2024.

121 Five female tea sellers and migrant workers from the Nuba Mountains in Rubkona, travelling from Ajuong Thok camp, 16 May 2024; head of Nuer women traders in Rubkona, 15 May 2024.

Mankien and Jokrial, 20 litres of fuel now costs SSP 160,000 compared to SSP 15,000 in 2015.<sup>122</sup>

Most people are cutting down on clinical drugs or can't afford them at all, prompting them to turn to herbal medicine. In the case of serious medical situations, some Nuba refugees choose to head back to Nuba Mountains hospitals.<sup>123</sup> Turning to education, government school fees are now SSP 1,500 per term, divided between *payam*, county and state governments. Meanwhile, private school fees, which have more consistent teacher provision, cost SSP 4000–5,000 per month.<sup>124</sup> As a consequence, many parents can no longer afford to cover their children's educational expenses.

### THE WATERLILY ECONOMY

This close view of everyday costs demonstrates how deeply the cash economy has penetrated into everyday life and rural systems. It also shows the very tight margins many of the poorest families have come to face over the past few years, either due to sudden disasters or the slower grind of inflation.

Wiyieh Liah, who fled back from Kosti in 2023 with her youngest son and female friends, collects two bundles of firewood a day that she sells for SSP 600 each at Mankien. She uses half of this money to buy SSP 500 of flour and SSP 100 of salt every day for daily cooking.<sup>125</sup> Meanwhile, a group of Nuba refugee manual workers at Rubkona live in a combined household of ten men, pooling their wages when they manage to find work in order to cover daily living costs of SSP 1,000–2,000.<sup>126</sup> Rubkona manual workers used to rely heavily on eating DJs (the local nickname for Plumpy Nut, energy bars given to malnourished children) for physical energy, which now cost SSP 1,500.<sup>127</sup> Now, along with bus station workers, they tend to rely on cups of milk for daytime energy, which are more affordable at SSP 300.<sup>128</sup>

The rapid impoverishment of Nuba, Nuer and Dinka middle-class and low-income families in the borderlands over the past decade has pushed many people into towns and camps in an attempt to access regular market work and supplies. Conversely, urbanization—alongside rising prices and goods scarcities, especially in light of trade route changes over the last year—has

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122 Male Nuer fuel seller, Mankien, 3 June 2024; male Nuer market trader, Jokrial, 5 June 2024.

123 Seven male and female secondary school students from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 11 June 2024; seven children from the Nuba Mountains aged c. 8–15, interviewed with supervising adults, selling wood and grass at Yida camp, 12 June 2024; five male and female disabled refugees, Yida camp, 6 June 2024.

124 Male Nuer trader and sorghum seller, Chilaak, 23 May 2024; male Nuer teacher, Mankien, 7 June 2024.

125 Four Nuer women returnees from Sudan and market workers, Mankien, 7 June 2024.

126 Three women perfume sellers in Rubkona, refugees from the Sudan war, 16 May 2024.

127 Male Nuer wheelbarrow worker, Bentiu bridge, 27 May 2024.

128 Male Nuer disabled ex-SPLA soldier and market worker, Mayom New Market, 30 May 2024; male Nuer teacher, Mankien, 7 June 2024; five female Nuer farmers and wild food collectors, Mayom, 2 June 2024; male Nuer disabled ex-SPLA soldier and market worker, Mayom, 11 June 2024.

created new markets for rural goods, including fish, cheap housing materials and calorific food substitutes such as waterlily root. As observed by Nuer participants, 'Everything we depend on heavily now comes from the river'.<sup>129</sup>

This has pushed some of the poorest—often single mothers—into making long and dangerous round journeys, or alternatively remaining for sustained periods in forests and wetlands in order to gather poles, thatch and waterlily *keeh* (the rhizome root).<sup>130</sup> Water lily roots were long regarded as either a short-term emergency option or a lazy person's food. More recently, however, they have become a regular staple as a sorghum replacement, although some people argue it needs to be cooked with some fish to make it taste acceptable.<sup>131</sup> At Jokrial and Mayom, a *nyakuty* of sorghum costs SSP 10,000, compared to around SSP 4,500 for the equivalent tin of waterlily root.<sup>132</sup> This combined scarcity and demand has created a waterlily root market. Some women are buying up the roots at rural riversides (cheaper than investing in sorghum) and storing them until the market runs low, prompting prices to rise.<sup>133</sup> Others, particularly the poorest, have moved back from IDP camps to remote rural locations, where fish and waterlily are still available.<sup>134</sup> As a group of Nuer farmers describe it: 'Some have chosen to chase water, following the flow of water to get fish'.<sup>135</sup>

## THE RISE OF RENTAL MARKETS FOR SPACE AND TOOLS

The extension of town markets into more remote rural locations has brought with it an expansion of land rents. Rental markets in towns are already well established and take account of local pressures on space: for example, renting a tea shop in Rubkona costs SSP 50–70,000 a month, compared to just SSP 15,000 for a small tea shop in Mayom.<sup>136</sup> Now, though, rural areas are increasingly subject to systems of land rent, especially in areas of fertile agricultural soil and where refugee populations are seeking farming space. Initially, refugees at Pamir rented plots for SSP 1,000 per small area in 2018, but these prices have increased year on year to SSP 80,000–100,000 today.<sup>137</sup> All this is reflective of wider dynamics across the Sudan–South Sudan borderlands.

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129 Three elderly displaced Nuer men, Biemruor, 21 May 2024.

130 Four female Nuer wood sellers and waterlily workers, Mayom, 29 May 2024; male health worker and Nuba Mountains refugee, Ajuong Thok camp, 24 May 2024; male Nuer farmer and vegetable garden owner, Nhial Diu area, 22 May 2024.

131 Five female Nuer farmers and wild food collectors, Mayom, 2 June 2024.

132 Four female Nuer wood sellers and waterlily workers, Mayom, 29 May 2024.

133 Three elderly Nuer farmers, Jokrial, 3 June 2024.

134 Male displaced Nuer public toilet operator, Jokrial, 4 June 2024.

135 Three elderly Nuer farmers, Jokrial, 3 June 2024.

136 Five female tea sellers and migrant workers from the Nuba Mountains in Rubkona, travelling from Ajuong Thok camp, 16 May 2024.

137 Four male farmers from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024.



In addition, people regularly have to rent self-production tools and equipment due to a lack of capital. For example, hiring a fishing net costs SSP 1,000 per day, whereas buying a pre-made net at the market (which can be divided into eight large nets or 100 small hand-nets) costs SSP 200,000.<sup>138</sup> As observed by a group of Nuer fishermen:

[F]ishing the whole night and only catching only, like, fish which are sold at a low price is something unbearable. Imagine catching only ten fish and five of them being taken by the owner of the net, if you hire the net. It could've been good if one owns the net.<sup>139</sup>

At Bentiu, both Majok and Comdu hire locally-made wooden wheelbarrows for SSP 5,000 a day, along with two workers to push it. The wheelbarrow can transport 20 jerrycans of (washing, rather than drinking) water per trip from the bridge to town, each of which sells for SSP 400. A two-hour round trip, done three times a day, makes SSP 12,000 each trip, minus hire costs, provided it doesn't rain and turn the road to mud.<sup>140</sup>

Uncertain incomes and constant inflation mean there are very few avenues for obtaining formal loans. Women's rotating savings associations charge extortionate credit rates.<sup>141</sup> As elsewhere in South Sudan, most people are in some form of cash debt to friends, including NGO workers, who friends trust will have some funds at the end of the month.<sup>142</sup> Chiehjuol, who sells a variety of goods, borrows SSP 200,000 from friends over the course of a month and returns it with SSP 40,000 interest.<sup>143</sup> Meanwhile, Bijek, who was displaced into Rubkona from Wankei by flooding, bought a broken second-hand wooden wheelbarrow for SSP 20,000 in 2023 and is currently paying SSP 2,000 per day in repair costs.<sup>144</sup> Government and military agents can intimidate merchants into cheaper loans, with one Mankien fuel seller claiming he is owed SSP 950,000 from various authorities.<sup>145</sup>

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138 Five male Nuer fishermen, Gany river, 22 May 2024.

139 Five male Nuer fishermen, Gany river, 22 May 2024.

140 Male Nuer wheelbarrow worker, Bentiu bridge, 27 May 2024.

141 Four Nuer women returnees from Sudan and market workers, Mankien, 7 June 2024; Matai tried this and is struggling to repay the loan: male Nuer ex-SPLA soldier, Rubkona market, 18 May 2024.

142 Male Nuer NGO worker, Rubkona, 4 June 2024.

143 Male Nuer market trader, Jokrial, 5 June 2024.

144 Male Nuer wheelbarrow worker, Rubkona town, 15 May 2024.

145 Male Nuer fuel seller, Mankien, 3 June 2024.

# UNSAFE LAND AND RIGHTS TO SPACE

When considering the scale of the current ecological crisis, residents often place the various disasters in historical context. Here, John's comment is reflective of most younger people: 'I have never seen this kind of flooding before in my life'.<sup>146</sup> Older residents, by contrast, recall stories of Nyoic Lual (red-water flooding) four generations ago:

[T]he water was red, like blood is poured on it. It came during the time of the famously [miserly and] selfish man called Kulang Toat, from the Eastern Nuer. There is a story that Kulang told his son Chamkuan to sell all the cattle they had, and convert them into cash, because he smelt that flooding was coming. ... So his son sold the cows and the flooding did come. Those who did not sell their cattle lost them all to flooding.<sup>147</sup>

More recently, people point to the floods of 2007, when families lost a large amount of cattle.<sup>148</sup> These are useful prompts for discussing ecological signs of future nyoic (flooding),<sup>149</sup> as well as previously used adaptations that need to be revived.<sup>150</sup> Many people know it is likely they will have to permanently relocate. As a Nuer teacher puts it: 'we don't inhabit where we habited, and we inhabit where we have never habited'.<sup>151</sup> People note that in recent years those most able to move have been able to rescue their cattle, especially farmers able to negotiate land in Mayom in 2022.<sup>152</sup>

Many people initially tried to find safe areas in Panakuach, but floods there in 2022 and 2023 prompted many people to turn south-west. Although those who moved up to Ajak Kuac near Abiemnhom were able to avoid cattle losses in the waters, they faced very high rates of disease

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146 Male Nuer NGO office director, Bentiu, 15 May 2024.

147 Three elderly Nuer farmers, Jokrial, 3 June 2024.

148 Three elderly Nuer farmers, Jokrial, 3 June 2024.

149 Male Nuer farmer and vegetable garden owner, Nhial Diu area, 22 May 2024.

150 Two Nuer NGO health workers, Rubkona, 20 May 2024; three elderly displaced Nuer men, Biemruor, 21 May 2024.

151 Male Nuer teacher, Mankien, 7 June 2024.

152 Two male Nuer ex-SPLA soldiers (one disabled), Rubkona market, 18 May 2024.

due—it was suspected—to overcrowding.<sup>153</sup> This has driven people back towards dryer but riskier but areas on the Ruweng–Nuba Mountains borders, where the national government is encouraging South Sudanese returnee resettlement.<sup>154</sup> All this means that farmers and cattle herders are having to navigate oil field security; armed Baggara cattle herders moving across from Abyei and south Darfur; multiple barrack sites containing tensely integrated SPLA-IO and SSPDF forces; and SPLM-N bases. On this, a Nuer NGO protection officer comments:

After the oil companies, between the borders with Sudan, you will see people moving with their farm tools going to prepare their lands. These people do not care about security because hunger is forcing them to go to work on their farms ... We are also afraid because the areas they are cultivating on are near the oil mining.<sup>155</sup>

Discussions among participants over safe resettlement locations prompt conversations about soil and water contamination; unexploded ordinance from decades of conflict sites; and wider pollution, including from boat engines.<sup>156</sup>

The violent securitization of the borderlands over the past ten years has proven useful for the SPLM-N and the SSPDF, together with its allied militias, beyond merely the cash incomes secured from raids, taxes and checkpoints. The floods and droughts have pushed people into the belts of good pasture and farmland previously subject to mass depopulating violence (especially in western, central and southern Unity, and in the oil corridor to Panakuach), and which now contain the ‘peacetime’ security providers’ commercialized farms and businesses. The availability of a low-paid workforce greatly serves the demands of these interests, especially at Rubkona, Mayom, Manga port and in the Panakuach corridor, as it helps keep production and social reproduction costs low and profits high. Moreover, it is useful in calling for NGO and international support and investment within their territories.

Given the rapidly growing rent markets for both urban homes and rural farmland, it is unclear to what extent, and for how long, people will be able to resettle based on extended kin rights to community space. Here, the Nuba refugees may offer a bellwether for how people can be kept in a state of non-accumulation and impermanence when outside their ‘home land’. In theory, community lands have been donated by the government to UNHCR for Nuba refugees to cultivate. In practice, however, local community members often ‘reclaim’ such land (including once refugees have cleared and cultivated them), arguing they have not given over ownership.<sup>157</sup> There are extensive reports of rape, murder and theft, including of livestock, as well as attacks

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153 Five male Nuer fishermen, Gany river, 22 May 2024.

154 Male Nuer NGO protection officer, Bentiu, 15 May 2024; male Nuer NGO office director, Bentiu, 15 May 2024; Mosel and Moro, ‘Conflict-Sensitive Returns’, 17, 26.

155 Male Nuer NGO protection officer, Bentiu, 15 May 2024.

156 Five male Nuer fishermen, Gany river, 22 May 2024; male Nuer NGO office director, Bentiu, 15 May 2024.

157 Nine male and female farmers and camp area leaders from the Nuba Mountains, Ajuong Thok camp, 29 May 2024; group of male and female farmers from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024.

on herders grazing goats in forests or on local land, with Nuba refugees claiming that 'here we cultivate with fear'.<sup>158</sup> While some attacks and murders have resulted in compensation being paid after negotiations, camp authorities appear unable to effectively negotiate the return of stolen goods and farmland.

The significant levels of insecurity on roads between and around the camps in north-east Ruweng has left many refugees dependent on doing poorly-paid piecework farming for local residents, or having to engage in indentured labour.<sup>159</sup> There is little recourse for refugees who are victims of theft on the roads, as 'they say we are refugees and we are supposed to stay in one place'.<sup>160</sup> The research came across several reports of Nuba children and young people being employed as cattle herders over several months in return for promises of eventual payment.<sup>161</sup> Unlike similar arrangements elsewhere in South Sudan, Darfur and Kordofan more widely—where young men and women work in family cattle camps for their share of milk sales and seasonal payment in the form of a calf or goat—this new form of indenture involves no familial ties or means of obtaining recourse. In light of this, there have been rumours of mistreatment, disappearances and deaths.

## CLASS RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL DIVISIONS

As the residents of the borderlands make clear, the past ten years of war, displacement and ecological crisis have sped up class stratification, with the wealth of middle- and lower-income families collapsing: 'the poor are becoming more poor, and people are dying of hunger'.<sup>162</sup> Instead, a smaller, narrower class whose interests are rooted in trade network control, military systems and access to state power has accumulated wealth through managing the topography and outcomes of these crises. This group includes Sudanese cross-border traders, as well as South Sudanese army generals, who are often able to trade in dollars. As such, a fundamental class divide has arisen between those who can ride out inflation through dollar wealth and those who are subject to it. Anger at this dollar power is reflected in the lyrics of a songwriting group's appeal to the new governor:

**Lead:** Even a mere razorblade is bought at SSP 1,000

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158 Female water point coordinator from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 4 June 2024; group of male and female farmers from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024; six male and female farmers from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 5 June 2024; male health worker and Nuba Mountains refugee, Ajuong Thok camp, 24 May 2024.

159 Male casual worker from the Nuba Mountains, Ajuong Thok camp, 24 May 2024; female restaurant owner from the Nuba Mountains, Jamjang town, 31 May 2024; male casual worker from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 24 May 2024; head of Nuba Mountains women's union, Ajuong Thok camp, 24 May 2024; group of male farmers from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024; male Nuer NGO worker, Rubkona, 4 June 2024.

160 Male casual worker from the Nuba Mountains, Ajuong Thok camp, 24 May 2024.

161 Male chairman for the Nuba Mountains refugees, Yida camp, 6 June 2024.

162 Female restaurant owner from the Nuba Mountains, Rubkona town, 16 May 2024.

**All:** We are waiting for the coming of Mathew, the dollar is rejected

**Lead:** Even a water lily is bought at SSP 1,000

**All:** We are waiting for the coming of Mathew, the dollar is rejected

**Lead:** A shoe is bought at more than SSP 1,000, X2

**All:** We are waiting for the coming of Mathew, the dollar is rejected

**Lead:** A pen for our children to study with is SSP 1,000

**All:** We are waiting for the coming of Mathew, the dollar is rejected<sup>163</sup>

This stratification has changed local political definitions of class, most visibly around discussions of urbanization. In the wake of the 2013 economic crisis, towns had already begun drawing in middle-income families seeking better schools and healthcare access, thereby undermining rural education provision.<sup>164</sup> Now, the desperation driving the rapid urban growth seen across the region in recent years has changed the language locals use to describe the choice to reside in towns:

When the water came so many people in the villages migrated to the *kaal* (town). The main meaning behind *kaal* was that it was meant for poor people, people who had no cattle in the village. So they ran to the town to get government support. Now everybody has been turned into *kal* (a person with few or no cattle). All people depend on humanitarian assistance. Even our historically wealthy people, who had a lot of resources, are vulnerable with us.<sup>165</sup>

People across South Sudan have frequently pointed to cash work in towns as having atomizing, individualizing and selfish effects on people, with urban life allowing people to evade their mutual responsibilities and the sharing economies of kinship networks.<sup>166</sup> People in Yida and Mankien alike, however, emphasize the necessity of social connection and trust in town. In this respect, the study encountered various groups of friends and families across the region who are living together and pooling resources.<sup>167</sup> As a teacher in Makien explained: 'Living in town is highly linked with friendships; I manage this simply because I have friends who sometimes help

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163 Female Nuer song expert, Mankien, 6 June 2024.

164 Four Nuer women returnees from Sudan and market workers, Mankien, 7 June 2024; three elderly Nuer farmers, Jokrial, 3 June 2024.

165 Male Nuer farmer and vegetable garden owner, Nhial Diu area, 22 May 2024.

166 Naomi Pendle and Deng Maror, 'Rural Radicalism in the Capital City: The Impact of Histories of Inequitable Safety on Patterns of Violence', *African Studies Review* (14 August 2024): 11. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.29>. Some families continue to receive remittances from Juba and internationally-resident family members, but these funds are often specifically used to pay for court fees, dowry payments, and school fees at key points of the year, rather than daily expenses.

167 Five male and female disabled refugees, Yida camp, 6 June 2024.

when there is nothing at hand'.<sup>168</sup>

The commonly-noted sense of atomization and alienation arguably stems more from having increasingly limited family resources available to share, combined with the divisions and anger sown by the multiple wars and raids seen over the past decade. In particular, the scale of the predatory, cruel violence used by Bul Nuer youth in attacks across Unity and Ruweng has provoked deep anger not only against the Bul, but within the Bul section itself. Moreover, the fact that cattle raids have increasingly targeted closely-related clans has divided people on a very personal level. Gatduel, an elderly farmer displaced to Jokrial, notes that 'when the crisis [*dak ro*] came, it started with close relatives stealing their own cattle. Some youth will steal from their own relatives and then take the cattle they have stolen to the side of the Dinka and exchange them with the cattle and come back with different cattle'.<sup>169</sup> Meanwhile, Kerbino, a cattle trader at Mabil, notes that familial desperation to rebuild social security means elders encourage, or at best turn a blind eye to, raided and stolen cattle and goods.<sup>170</sup>

Extensive research over the past five years has documented the gendered impacts of impoverishment on, among other things, women's domestic, market and reproductive labour burdens; rates of domestic violence and child marriage; and cattle raiding driven by bridewealth pressures.<sup>171</sup> Both the men and women of the borderlands echo these concerns, with such pressures accelerating the wider transition to cash bridewealth payments seen across South Sudan.<sup>172</sup> Residents note both this marketization of marriage (as negotiated amounts track inflation) and the rise of marriage without bridewealth payments: 'No one is sure his daughter will be married officially. Many girls are taken for free'.<sup>173</sup> Families may now decide to wait for better economic times to renegotiate bridewealth amounts, storing up disputes and court cases for the future.<sup>174</sup>

Gai Kuol, a fisherman at Gany River, observes though that 'the narrative of marriage is beginning to change slowly due to this water', as are some generational and gendered norms: men (not just

168 Male Nuer teacher, Mankien, 7 June 2024.

169 Three elderly Nuer farmers, Jokrial, 3 June 2024.

170 Male Nuer cattle trader, Mabil, 4 June 2024.

171 Elizabeth Nyibol Malou, 'The Triple Burden; Women Selling Their Labour in South Sudan', Rift Valley Institute, 2024; Diing et al., 'South Sudan: Youth, Violence and Livelihoods', Rift Valley Institute, 2021; Elysia Buchanan, 'Born to Be Married: Addressing Early and Forced Marriage in Nyal, South Sudan', Oxfam, February 2019.

172 Three elderly Nuer farmers, Jokrial, 3 June 2024; male Nuer disabled ex-SPLA soldier and market worker, Mayom New Market, 30 May 2024; four female Nuer wood sellers and waterlily workers, Mayom, 29 May 2024.

173 Pospisil et al., 'Bring Enough Cows to Marry: Brideprice, Conflict, and Gender Relations in South Sudan', PeaceRep, 2024, 22; two Nuer NGO health workers, Rubkona, 20 May 2024; male Nuer traders' union leader, Mayom New Market, 31 May 2024; male Nuer teacher, Mankien, 7 June 2024; male Nuer teacher, Mankien, 7 June 2024.

174 Three elderly displaced Nuer men, Biemruor, 21 May 2024.

women) are now selling grain and firewood, and young (not just old) men are selling fish.<sup>175</sup> In many cases, the impoverishment of formerly well-off families has collapsed previous divides: 'these changes have brought people to face equal issues'.<sup>176</sup>

All this contributes to widespread anger at the divisive greed of the small network regarded by others as 'elites', most sharply expressed through songwriting. Even celebration songs composed for new Unity State governor Riak Bim's welcoming ceremony contain pointed rebukes:

We are suffering, only going to the bush to collect firewood,  
and we go to the river to collect water lily roots,  
we are being starved by the son of nameless.  
And we are coming to ask our leader.<sup>177</sup>

The problem of deep class, ethnic and social stratification is clearly summarized in the lyrics of the following song:

Hunger, my cousin, why are you so terrible on us?  
Mr Red Hunger, why are you so furious with us?  
My brother, why are you so angry with us?  
... My fellow South Sudanese, what prevents us from walking together?  
Mr Mathew Pul, what is preventing us from walking together?  
Daughter of Mading, what is preventing us from moving together?  
What is really preventing us from walking together?

The songwriter Elizabeth Nyadueiy Bidiet answers these questions thus: 'the daughter of Mr Mading doesn't bother with us, because people greet only those with big buttocks [*Neer ke ni ram mi te ke wuoth*: only those with big buttocks are greeted or respected]. Then I ask: where will those with no buttocks go to?'<sup>178</sup>

## PROTEST AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

Nuba refugees and South Sudanese residents have made various organizational attempts to manage the pressures of poverty wages, scarce resources and unfair extractive government. Most longstanding are the traders' unions, labour unions and camp committees that attempt to mediate a range of abuses and disputes. The cross-border traders' union based at Yida, which issues permits and shares advice, works in partnership with the CRA which is closely linked with

175 Four female Nuer wood sellers and waterlily workers, Mayom, 29 May 2024; five male Nuer fishermen, Gany river, 22 May 2024; disabled Nuer ex-SPLA soldier, Mankien market, 10 June 2024; male Nuer NGO worker, Rubkona, 4 June 2024.

176 Male Nuer traders' union leader, Mayom New Market, 31 May 2024.

177 Nuer women's song group, Mankien, 6 June 2024.

178 Female Nuer song expert, Mankien, 6 June 2024.

the SPLM-N government in the Nuba Mountains.<sup>179</sup> The Yida traders' union also acts as a social security association, pooling fees to cover emergency medical costs or the sudden destitution of members.<sup>180</sup>

These unions take many forms across the borderland: for example, the Mayom traders' union also organizes fundraisers for struggling members, while a Nuba casual labourers' union in Mayom town pools its SSP 200–300 per person membership fees to support new arrivals.<sup>181</sup> Nyabor Nyuon Yoch, chair of the women's trade union in Rubkona, is 'tasked to monitor those who are collecting illegal tax from the women in the open market', and supervises tax collectors.<sup>182</sup> Elsewhere, the Nuba Union in Rubkona attempts to ensure Nuba refugees arrested and imprisoned in the town get legal recourse and release.<sup>183</sup> At Yida, with water points falling into disrepair after 2016 as aid agencies moved support to the official camps at Ajuong Thok and Pamir, a women's association organized overseers tasked with managing orderly water queues, and engaged in collective fundraising for maintenance.<sup>184</sup>

There are, however, limited ways for either South Sudanese or Nuba workers to challenge unpaid wages or bills.<sup>185</sup> Ebal, the school-going brickmaker at Yida, attempts to use social pressure in the first instance (by following the debtor around), then as a last resort reports the unpaid bill to the neighbourhood block leader.<sup>186</sup>

Borderland residents are also at the forefront of a new wave of rural and urban protests, which have been building since 2018 in both Sudan and South Sudan. Refugees, displaced people and residents alike have organized protests and strikes against cuts to food aid and the external recruitment of graduates; the state imposition of representatives; the illegal detention of activists and elected local leaders; and cuts to provisions for disabled refugees and IDPs. At

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179 Male head of the Nuba traders' union, Yida camp, 7 June 2024; group of male farmers from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024; five elderly disabled men from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024; group of male and female farmers from the Nuba Mountains, Pamir camp, 30 May 2024; male trader from Talodi, Yida camp, 6 June 2024; three male traders from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 7 June 2024; five farmers from the Nuba mountains, Yida camp, 5 June 2024.

180 Male head of the Nuba traders' union, Yida camp, 7 June 2024.

181 Male Nuer traders' union leader, Mayom New Market, 31 May 2024; four male casual workers from the Nuba Mountains, Rubkona town, 17 May 2024.

182 Head of Nuer women traders in Rubkona, 15 May 2024.

183 Male chairperson of the Nuba Mountains community at Rubkona, 17 May 2024; male Nuer NGO worker, Rubkona, 4 June 2024.

184 Head of Nuba Mountains women's association, Yida camp, 4 June 2024; seven male and female secondary school students from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 11 June 2024; two male construction workers who arrived from Sudan in December 2023, Yida camp, 13 June 2024; female water point coordinator from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 4 June 2024; male chairman for the Nuba Mountains refugees, Yida camp, 6 June 2024.

185 Male NGO worker from the Nuba Mountains, Ajuong Thok camp, 31 May 2024; Male Nuer NGO protection officer, Bentiu, 15 May 2024.

186 Female bricklayer and school student from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 13 June 2024.



the same time, they have demanded the clean-up of oil pollution; provision of roads, services and clean water; and removal of much-hated and now former governor Nguen Monytil. The protests have included attacks on humanitarian agencies at Jamjang, Ajuong Thok and Pamir camps against external hiring and unfair wages, echoing similar protests across South Sudan during 2021–2023.<sup>187</sup>

## RISKY MIGRANT WORK OPTIONS

The intensity of the protests against external hiring by oil companies and NGOs reflects a core problem for most people on this borderland: they currently have very limited exit routes. Leaving the region is now prohibitively expensive, with all routes out generally very dangerous. Even public transport to Bentiu from Mayom is SSP 20,000.<sup>188</sup> Refugee and IDP camps, meanwhile, do not provide sufficient emergency food aid and clean water to weather the situation in the mid-term.

Overall, this is a hazardous, disabling environment for both Nuba and South Sudanese families, characterized by chronic overwork and malnutrition, so much so that ‘our eyes have gone deep inside our heads like old people [*ci nyin ko juor rec pooreh da cie ke ney ti diit*]’.<sup>189</sup> Carrying goods across water and overland for long distances, digging waterlily roots, night fishing (for higher catches), tree-felling and charcoal-making—on top of cattle camp work and farming—all involve hazardous, physically stressful labour, carrying the risk of snake bites; falls and broken limbs; skin diseases and infections; and high rates of malaria.<sup>190</sup> Many returnees from northern towns, especially children, do not know how to swim. As a consequence, drownings are increasing, especially for young children travelling with their mothers for work in fields and forests.<sup>191</sup> Many people are becoming chronically ill and disabled. Keah Chan’s leg was shot and broken in the war over Lich (where he was herding cattle and got caught in crossfire): ‘when God has decided that you will be spoiled nothing stops it [*ci raan nyaah*]’.<sup>192</sup> Injuries and disabling conditions limit the people’s scope of work, and degree of travel possible when seeking employment.<sup>193</sup>

The end result is that piecemeal and day labour jobs are flooded with workers, which in turn means pay is not rising with inflation. Young people whose families can no longer afford school

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187 Joshua Craze, ‘The Angel’s Dilemma’, *The Baffler* 71 (November 2023). <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/the-angels-dilemma-craze>.

188 Male Nuer disabled ex-SPLA soldier and market worker, Mayom New Market, 30 May 2024.

189 Four female Nuer wood sellers and waterlily workers, Mayom, 29 May 2024.

190 Male Nuer wheelbarrow worker, Bentiu bridge, 27 May 2024; five male Nuer fishermen, Gany river, 22 May 2024.

191 Female Nuer laundry worker and returnee from Khartoum, Rubkona, 16 May 2024.

192 Two male Nuer ex-SPLA soldiers, one disabled, Rubkona market, 18 May 2024.

193 Male Nuer disabled ex-SPLA soldier, Mankien, 30 May 2024.

costs are also flooding into the market,<sup>194</sup> with some children employed by traders as travelling hawkers in exchange for tips or a meal.<sup>195</sup> Young men may walk very long distances in search of better work options: for instance, Nuba young men often walk from Liri down to Rubkona, a minimum three-day walk of about 300 km.<sup>196</sup> Some men are turning to high-risk trading into areas of active conflict in Sudan in the hope of higher returns, such as running jerrycans of fuel into the Nuba Mountains and returning with sorghum sacks.<sup>197</sup> Other men, including some of the demobilized terchuong, have organized road robbery gangs.<sup>198</sup>

In this context, it is unsurprising that many people report there was a relatively large movement of—mostly male—workers northwards across the Sudan border during the early rains in 2024.<sup>199</sup> This movement included workers seeking out the gold mines at Talodi, as well as Nuba workers returning to farms in the mountains.<sup>200</sup>

Other people are taking river routes to Malakal and Renk, aiming for SAF-held commercial farming areas in eastern Sudan.<sup>201</sup> Some men are heading north with the intention of joining one of the armies—they already risk forced recruitment by forces at border-crossing points, whether moving south or north, as well as within South Sudan's borders.<sup>202</sup> Meanwhile, some women who suffered rape and detention by armed groups while travelling to seek refuge in South Sudan talk about returning north in order to at least escape family shame.<sup>203</sup>

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194 Two male construction workers who arrived from Sudan in December 2023, Yida camp, 13 June 2024.

195 Seven male and female secondary school students from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 11 June 2024.

196 Seven male and female secondary school students from the Nuba Mountains, Yida camp, 11 June 2024.

197 Male Nuer NGO protection officer, Bentiu, 15 May 2024.

198 Two Nuer NGO health workers, Rubkona, 20 May 2024; male displaced Nuer public toilet operator, Jokrial, 4 June 2024; male Nuer NGO office director, Bentiu, 15 May 2024.

199 Male Nuer NGO protection officer, Bentiu, 15 May 2024; female Nuer tea seller and returnee from Sudan, Rubkona, 16 May 2024.

200 Male NGO finance officer, Yida camp, 12 June 2024.

201 Male Nuer NGO office director, Bentiu, 15 May 2024.

202 Male Nuer NGO protection officer, Bentiu, 15 May 2024; male Nuer returnee from Khartoum, Rubkona town, 16 May 2024. In January 2022 and January 2023, there was forced recruitment of young men into a joint police force at Bentiu IDP camp, and again at Panyijiar into the SPLA-IO—it was possible to buy your freedom. Small Arms Survey/HSABA, 'The Body Count', 5.

203 Female Nuer tea seller and returnee from Sudan, Rubkona, 16 May 2024.

# CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The impact of disrupted oil incomes on state stability in Sudan and South Sudan, as well as parallel struggles over factional consolidation via post-Tumaini Initiative and post-Juba Peace Agreement brokerage, are only marginally relevant to borderland systems.<sup>204</sup> Central state incomes mostly impact the borderland areas in the form of personalized investments in commercial farms, mines and urban rentals. Thus, diminished oil incomes primarily affect the state privateers' own finances and networks, rather than these regional investments.<sup>205</sup>

In general, borderland residents are alienated by the lack of accountability or care shown by the state and its agents, as well as their constant predation on people's basic livelihoods. As a Nuer farmer observes:

We are tired of governments that do not serve people. Even the next government will be the same. Let those who wish to vote do it. Last year, a soldier moving with his cattle allowed his cattle to feed on our farms. When we asked him why, he was very angry and wanted to kill us. That is because the government is not good.<sup>206</sup>

The economic systems and public authorities on the Sudan–South Sudan borderlands are—irrespective of the changing flows of people and trade—relatively stable in terms of their zones of control. Like the western borderlands with Darfur, military control over both sides of the Unity–Nuba Mountains border has remained fairly static despite moving RSF and SAF battlelines further north. This control is not peaceful, and relies on using private security (variously called militias, bodyguards, security companies, police or armies, but serving similar functions) to perpetuate tensions over access to land, water and work. The growing market for private security includes NGO and IDP sites, as well as oil fields, ports and commercial investments. In light of what is an extremely exploitative system, this report has attempted to unpick what 'class predation' looks like in practice.<sup>207</sup>

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204 Luke Patey, 'Oil, Gold, and Guns: The Violent Politics of Sudan's Resource Re-Curse', *Environment and Security* (31 August 2024): 14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27538796241272367>.

205 Tarun Gopalakrishnan and Jared Miller, 'New Climate Dis-Economies: The Political Economy of Energy Transitions in Fragile Fossil Fuel Producers', *Environment and Security* (31 August 2024): 2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27538796241272361>.

206 Male Nuer farmer and vegetable garden owner, Nhial Diu area, 22 May 2024.

207 Craze, 'From Petrodollars to Licenses', 12.

In addition, land, water and work continue to be determined by the spreading floods and droughts caused by the climate crisis. Heavy floodwaters compound recent histories of inter-family violence, financial breakdown and the inability of many families to support extended kin. They also increase the costs of subsistence farming, as planting patterns are unpredictable, topsoil becomes eroded and pollution is moved ever further across the landscape.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS**

Wars, floods and pollution, together with resettlement aimed at accessing market incomes, have created frustrated, often multiply-displaced populations. Ultimately, safe, sustained access to land will determine who is able to (re)build family security. The question of land rights cannot, however, be disconnected from the question of who will work on it and on what terms, as well as—crucially—who will profit from it.

### ***Commercialization of land and new opportunities for sales***

Investors in South Sudan and the Nuba Mountains are following wider trends by focusing on crops (grains, coffee, cotton, oils); livestock and forest goods exports (wood, charcoal, Gum Arabic); and diversified mineral extraction.<sup>208</sup> In recent years, research on state privatization and self-funding has mostly focused on checkpoints and taxation, overlooking the fact that commercialization of these wider extractive goods involves the realization of the 2008–2012 boom period's huge private land sales, leases and prospecting licencing. Many of these land deals only previously existed on paper, and have now been supplemented by a new bonanza of land sales and private farmland consolidation. This turn to commercial farming is being pushed by, among other means, repeated South Sudan Governors' Forum recommendations that use the populist language of local development.

Expanding rural privatization is being accompanied by the rise of 'conservation'-framed deals, which involve leasing national park management rights, as well as the growth of carbon credit companies making sales against 'owned' forests and lands. Those supporting these possibilities for environmental and economic development must carefully consider the impacts of the land claims they rest on.

### ***The utility of maintaining cheap labour reserves***

The turn to commercial land privatization will not just entrench already deep wealth and income inequalities via the privatization and monopolization of capital investments, it will also almost certainly reinforce the depressed waged-labour systems needed to sustain a cheap workforce. Cheap migrant workers have been at the heart of the Sudanese commercial agricultural and mining systems since the 1940s, and will likely prove crucial to South Sudan's similar emerging model.

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208 See Edward Thomas and Magdi El-Gizouli, 'Financing the Juba Peace Agreement in Sudan's New Political Economy', XCEPT Programme. Rift Valley Institute, September 2022, 3.

This model can most readily be tested in the borderlands, where those workers not employed to securitize oilfields, farms, mines and compounds can be disciplined into fixed-rate work through taxation and controls on their mobility (via force, cost or high risks). The rise of medium- and large-scale commercial farms—including around towns and cities, as well as on the Jau borderlands—already involves piecework that is not only poorly paid, but often dangerous and without any means of gaining recourse.

Donors and international agencies need to take the recent waves of protest about workers' rights and access to good wages extremely seriously. Supporting fair wages, strengthening labour union oversight and supporting legal pathways of challenging abuses or unfair pay are the bare minimum needed to address the impacts of monopoly commercialization.

### ***Rebuilding social security in rising waters***

People will be better able to push for higher wages, fairer conditions and access to emerging commercial markets if they can rebuild the middle-income levels of wealth eroded by the past ten years of sustained destruction. During this time, ever more people have found themselves unable to fund the expense of multiple planting seasons: 'the more early you must be, the more privileged you must be'.<sup>209</sup> The pressures of rising taxation, inflation and the repeated draining of family reserves and investments have also pushed families to the limits of social reproduction, with children now required to work in markets and forests. Moreover, refugee and IDP camps in Sudan and South Sudan no longer provide sufficient basic security to underwrite the costs of child and elderly care.

Social security reconstruction requires fair access to safe land, including grazing land, as well as adaptive cultivation spread across the changing rain patterns.<sup>210</sup> Residents are already attempting to adapt to increasingly wet conditions by testing new rice crops and vegetable farms. During dissemination of the report's research in November 2024, residents and refugees emphasized the necessity of mutualizing risk management systems in order to minimize competition over crucial survival resources. This involves, among other things, shared dyke-building and maintenance; cooperation between farmers and herders on fertilizing soils; and cross-community veterinary care.

With rising floodwaters pushing people into more frequent, and likely more permanent, displacement, it is inevitable that there will be a growing number of confrontations over the terms of land sharing. Against this backdrop, increasing commercialization and rental markets for rural farmland may incentivize absolute claims to 'indigenous' family land and grazing, with the aim of gaining the right to commodify it. Open conversations on the subject are already taking place across the borderland, and people must be given the space to discuss ways of navigating these destructive pressures.

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209 Nuer wheelbarrow worker, Rubkona town, 15 May 2024.

210 As argued by male Nuer wheelbarrow worker, Rubkona town, 15 May 2024.

# GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS, WORDS AND PHRASES

<b>CRA</b>	Commission for Refugee Affairs
<b>IDP</b>	internally displaced person
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organization
<b>NSS</b>	National Security Services
<b>RAA</b>	Ruweng Administrative Area
<b>RSF</b>	Rapid Support Force
<b>SAF</b>	Sudanese Armed Forces
<b>SPLA/M</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement
<b>SPLM/A-IO</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement-In Opposition
<b>SPLM-N</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North
<b>SSLA</b>	South Sudan Liberation Army
<b>SSPDF</b>	South Sudan People's Defence Forces
<b>UNHCR</b>	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme

*A note on currency. The South Sudanese Pound has depreciated significantly. At the time of research (in mid-2024), USD 1 = SSP 5,000.*

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