

Researching livelihoods and  
services affected by conflict

# Looking back to look ahead? Reviewing key lessons from Operation Lifeline Sudan and past humanitarian operations in South Sudan



Working Paper 24

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October 2014

# About us

Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) aims to generate a stronger evidence base on how people make a living, educate their children, deal with illness and access other basic services in conflict-affected situations (CAS). Providing better access to basic services, social protection and support to livelihoods matters for the human welfare of people affected by conflict, the achievement of development targets such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and international efforts at peace- and state-building.

At the centre of SLRC's research are three core themes, developed over the course of an intensive one-year inception phase:

- State legitimacy: experiences, perceptions and expectations of the state and local governance in conflict-affected situations
- State capacity: building effective states that deliver services and social protection in conflict-affected situations
- Livelihood trajectories and economic activity under conflict

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# Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge excellent reviews and feedback from Luka Biong Deng, Wendy Fenton, Vagisha Gunasekera, Paul Harvey, and Larry Minear. The authors are solely responsible for errors or omissions.

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# 1 Introduction

***One of the most bitter tragedies of Sudan is that the dilemmas facing humanitarian organizations today are almost exactly those faced repeatedly over the last ten years.***

*Francois Jean (MSF) 1993*

***[T]he threat to the children of South Sudan is mounting by the minute ... We are perilously close to seeing history repeat itself.***

*Anthony Lake (UNICEF) 2014*

Since December 2013, South Sudan has once again been embroiled in wide-scale internal conflict, resulting in the internal displacement of 1.3 million people, with an additional 450,000 seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. The fighting and displacement has led to significantly increased requirements for humanitarian assistance, and a significantly scaled-up response, with some 3.8 million people in need, only 2.7 million of whom have been reached with some proportion of what they require (OCHA, 2014). Given the shortfalls in aid and the constraints – both physical and political – in accessing affected populations, there is widespread fear that the situation will deteriorate further before it improves. Humanitarian agencies have been trying to scale up operations over the past eight months, and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future.

Since 2012, the [Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium](#) (SLRC) has been conducting research on livelihoods in conflict-affected and post-conflict situations in eight countries, including South Sudan. Since the renewed outbreak of conflict in 2013, SLRC has re-oriented its research towards the current crisis. Interviews conducted with Government of South Sudan officials, donors and humanitarian agencies by the research team in June 2014 suggested that a retrospective view of large-scale humanitarian operations in South Sudan in the past would be helpful for the current operation. There was very much a mantra among respondents – particularly in the humanitarian community – of ‘not repeating the mistakes of OLS’ (Operation Lifeline Sudan), but no clear consensus on what those ‘mistakes’ were, or what lessons should be gleaned. While the constraints were many, and no doubt mistakes were made, OLS was in its time an innovative approach to negotiated access to war-affected populations on both sides of a civil war that had both positive and negative impacts on both the war and the civilian population. It would be myopic to simply consider the ‘mistakes’ of OLS, and naive to think that one could simply apply the ‘lessons’ of OLS to today’s context. Nevertheless, there is good reason for today’s donors and humanitarian aid workers to have a greater sense of what actually happened during OLS, and to foster deeper discussion between South Sudanese officials (most of whom experienced OLS first hand) and contemporary humanitarian agency officials (most of whom did not). This brief review is offered towards the goal of promoting greater understanding.

OLS was reviewed on a number of occasions, and the reader is encouraged to look at those reviews in greater detail (the major ones are referenced here). This short paper will raise only the most salient points arising out of those reviews and reviews of related humanitarian operations. During its lifespan, OLS received – and responded to – a significant amount of criticism, in some cases adapting its approach and procedures. Critical analysis has continued since, hence the desire to review the lessons that were learned (or are still to be learned) just as yet another large-scale humanitarian response is required in South Sudan. The purpose of this paper is not so much to present the distilled learning from the experience of an earlier era, but to attempt to put past efforts in context to promote discussion and innovation now.

The paper is structured as follows. The next (second) section is a brief introduction to Operation Lifeline Sudan – what it was and what it grew out of – followed by a brief summary of overall evaluations of OLS and its impact. The third section is a more detailed breakdown of the major criticisms of OLS, focusing particularly on its unintended impacts and outcomes. The fourth section highlights some more positive outcomes, focusing particularly on learning and adaptation over time. The final section is our attempt to distil some key ideas arising from the experience and put them more fully at the service of the current humanitarian response.

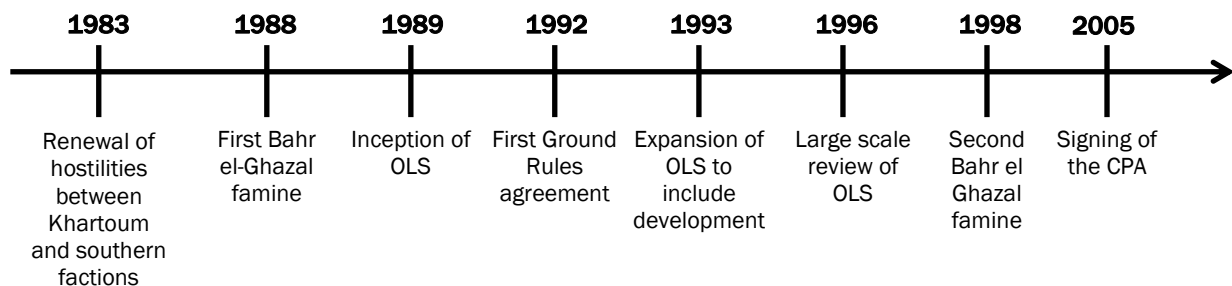
## 2 What was OLS?

The current crisis is at least the third major period of conflict in the past 50 years: the first was from independence until 1972 and the second from 1983 until the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2005. The second part of the civil war, particularly 1983 to 1989, and again in 1998, saw years of terrible suffering all over Sudan, north and south, due to conflict as well as climatic factors. While some aid agencies were active in both northern and southern Sudan throughout the 1980s, there was little in the way of coordinated response to the war-related hunger and displacement that killed hundreds of thousands of people through the middle of the decade (precise figures are very difficult to come by due to poor data collection as well as the complexity of the conflict situation). However, terrible flooding in 1988 brought renewed attention from journalists and foreign aid agencies to Khartoum, where they found tens of thousands of displaced southerners struggling to survive and eke out a livelihood in dismal conditions.

OLS was a tripartite agreement between the UN, the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) resulting from protracted negotiations among these parties. It began operations in 1989 as a multilateral humanitarian programme in response to a devastating, war-induced famine in Bahr el-Ghazal. At the time it was the largest-ever coordinated humanitarian programme (Riehl, 2001; Ojaba et al., 2002). The UN and western governments pressed the GoS and rebel movements to allow free passage and distribution of relief in the areas they controlled (Bradbury et al., 2000). OLS was managed by UN agencies and included more than 40 other international aid organisations (Karim et al., 1996). UNICEF was the lead agency within OLS southern sector while the Resident Coordinator in Khartoum was the overall lead. Having these separate administrative 'sectors' was controversial at the time (Minear, 1991). OLS supported conflict-affected communities in areas controlled by the government and in areas controlled by several (though not all) insurgent groups. In order to access beneficiaries, OLS eventually negotiated unique access agreements with the GoS as well as with rebel movements including the SPLM/A and the Southern Sudan Independence Movement (Johnson, 1994). OLS encompassed a wide spectrum of agencies with a wide range of different perspectives and approaches, making it difficult to evaluate all these different approaches as part of a single unified effort.

The re-ignition of hostilities between Khartoum and southern factions in 1983 coincided with drought and an influx of refugees from Ethiopia, leading to a major humanitarian emergency (de Waal, 1997; Minear, 1991). Khartoum severely restricted access to the famine-affected areas, classifying them as war zones, off-limits to aid workers and journalists (Minear, 1991). Terrible flooding in Khartoum in 1988, however, demanded both attention and a response, not least because of the approximately 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) from the south living in and around Khartoum. Subsequent media coverage of the situation was 'devastating' to Sudan's image abroad, leading to pressure on Khartoum to allow large-scale relief and eventually culminating in the creation of OLS (de Waal, 1997). During the first years of its existence, OLS focused on distributing emergency assistance and food aid. From 1993 it expanded in the southern sector to eventually include other food security interventions, livelihood support, human rights protection, capacity building, public services and other recovery and development-related activities, phrased somewhat simplistically as 'moving along the relief to development continuum' (Karim et al., 1996; Macrae et al., 1997: 233). This resulted from the realisation that programmes needed to build capacity and that whatever the outcome of the war, whenever peace would come, and whoever would be in charge, skills and capacities and infrastructure would be needed. As only humanitarian resources were available, these were used to support this approach. These changes also coincided with the SPLM's decision to establish a civil administration in 1994.

**Figure 1: Timeline of events related to OLS**



OLS was based on a process of ‘negotiated access,’ in which aid organisations and parties to the conflict come to an agreement regarding the behaviour of combatants towards aid workers – including aid worker security – and respect for international humanitarian law. ‘Negotiated access’ was a dynamic process that enabled humanitarian aid to reach affected populations, but required a clear understanding of the strategic aims and interests of the armed actors involved, and how they might change over time (Glaser, 2003). This access was mutable, eventually resulting in separate ‘sectors’ for GoS and rebel-controlled territories (Bradbury et al., 2000). OLS eventually signed ‘Ground Rules’ with different rebel movements to govern access to the areas under their control. The Ground Rules articulated the fundamental objective of OLS to provide humanitarian assistance to populations in need, regardless of location, and stipulated the guiding principles of neutrality and impartiality of aid operations, fair and equitable distribution of aid, transparency, tailored and responsive to local conditions and mechanisms, mutual respect between OLS actors and their counterparts, the safety and protection of relief workers, and a number of other provisions regarding aid provision, resource sharing, and capacity building (see Appendix 1 for full Ground Rules).

By 1995 OLS had established only restricted access to war-affected populations, funding was declining and the SPLM was considering stopping its cooperation (Bradbury et al., 2000). In view of this situation, donors called for an independent review. This was conducted in 1996 and it constituted ‘the first systematic assessment of the scope and limitations of humanitarian policy and practice in a chronic political emergency’ (Macrae et al., 1997: 224).

OLS was responsible for a number of ground-breaking initiatives including the wide-scale application of the household food economy approach and the livelihood zone profiles that came out of this. These were attempts to understand better how people were surviving and what role aid (food aid in particular) played in this. The South Sudan Vulnerability Study (Harrigan and Chol, 1998) and the Jonglei Field Officers Handbook (Greathead and Yol, 1998) made extremely important contributions to everyone’s understanding of South Sudan and are still key references today. But the 1996 review found that the overall success of OLS in protecting human life in war was mixed – and often not well monitored. OLS was, without a doubt, the most ambitious project of its kind that had been attempted up to that time, and it was successful in moving enormous amounts of food aid to recipients and fashioning the concept of negotiated humanitarian access to an active conflict zone (Karim et al., 1996). However, it was also highly constrained by the political realities of its context, such that aid allocation was more determined by political considerations and caprice than by explicit need, and it was highly exploited by the parties to the conflict for their own purposes at various times (Macrae et al., 1997; Johnson, 2011). One the most severe trials of OLS was the devastating famine in Bahr el-Ghazal in 1998 – nearly a decade after OLS was begun and sometime after these reviews were conducted (Deng, 1999).



### 3 Major critiques of OLS

Even prior to its inception in 1989, OLS was controversial, and it has remained so long after its conclusion. Given the dire humanitarian circumstances in Sudan throughout much of its existence, its innovative scope and approach, tremendous expense and questionable efficacy were all bound to be controversial. Some of the points of criticism were quite broad: such as that OLS was unsustainable and disempowering to local populations, that it was tremendously expensive, and that it created aid dependency (Bailey and Harragin, 2009; Bradbury, 1998; Aboum et al., 1990). Some critics, in fact, suggested that by the time of the 1996 review the OLS had lost its way and should be shut down (Minear, 1997). But it is also important to note that OLS's aims and objectives evolved over time.

The question of aid dependency, in particular, was the source of much consternation throughout OLS's lifespan (see below). At the same time, there were accusations that it 'only' responded to immediate needs and failed to address underlying causes of the crisis (Aboum et al., 1990; Bradbury et al., 2000). Yet it is fair to say that '[OLS] cannot be faulted for not accomplishing what it was not explicitly charged with doing' and what it moreover could not possibly have done (Minear, 1990: 131).

Perhaps a more reasonable metric in that regard was whether OLS accomplished what it set out to do, though this question too is equally difficult to answer. While it is clear that OLS opened the way to a greatly expanded aid operation – often the only clear standard by which it measured its success – it is less clear what the impact of that aid was (Duffield, 2002). It is impossible to say what the situation would have been *without* the presence of OLS, but that fact does not invalidate observations that it was 'inadequate in relation to needs' and had 'complex and sometimes contradictory effects' (Duffield et al., 2000: 206, 228). The utility of both its relief and capacity building projects has been called into question (Catley et al., 2005; Karim et al., 1996), partly because of the lack of any mechanism by which OLS might have measured its overall impacts – particularly of the massive food aid operation (Maxwell et al., 2006).

Among the numerous controversies plaguing the legacy of OLS was the decision to shift from a sole focus on emergency relief to more of a development agenda in the southern sector. Some observers viewed the decision to dramatically scale up and broaden the scope of aid to the south after 1991 'as an attempt by Western governments to assist the SPLM/A in resisting the Khartoum government's onslaught' (Bradbury et al., 2000: 24). OLS also arguably had a significant impact on the duration and outcomes of the war itself and the resulting political structure of the region. Some observers argue that the UN's willingness to care for those displaced in and from the south meant that there was less incentive for the southern factions to resolve their differences and stop their own fighting than they might have had otherwise (Branch and Mamphilly, 2004). At the same time, by negotiating and cooperating with southern rebel groups, particularly on the Ground Rules, OLS lent them credence as the recognised authorities in the areas under their control (Riehl, 2001; Bradbury et al., 2000). This conferral of legitimacy almost certainly contributed to their negotiating position with both international actors and Khartoum, which in turn may have prolonged the conflict, and almost certainly created the space in which the parties eventually negotiated the CPA in 2005, ultimately leading to South Sudan's independence in 2011.

#### 3.1 Operational challenges and criticisms

OLS was the first such major coordinated relief undertaking of the UN system; the UN's mandate allowed the participation of donors and NGOs who were either unable or unwilling to mount relief efforts on their own or under other auspices, but that is not to say that its leading institutions and donors were in agreement about the goals of the programme (Bradbury et al., 2000; Buchanan-Smith et al., 1999;

Karim et al., 1996; Macrae et al., 1997). The whole operation was at the mercy of both a rigid UN bureaucracy and the divergent objectives of the UN, donors and other international organisations (Buchanan-Smith et al., 1999; Bradbury, 1998; Macrae et al., 1997).

The policies and operating procedures laid down by OLS were said to be inconsistent and inadequate for responding to both sudden-onset and long-term situational shifts (Aboum et al., 1990; Buchanan-Smith et al., 1999; Catley et al., 2005; Duffield et al., 2000; Deng, 2003). With the emergence of distinct operational 'sectors' in northern and southern Sudan, OLS staff working in contested areas such as urban (GoS-controlled) and rural (SPLA-held) Bahr el-Ghazal might work within miles of one another, yet have 'only the most limited information about each other's work, report to very different management structures and operate according to different policies, principles and security procedures' (Levine 1997: 7). Operational categories and concepts were often 'derived from Western social policy' (Karim et al., 1996: 264), and differed in important ways from local understandings, such as in relation to 'vulnerability' and 'redistribution' of goods (Harragin and Chol, 1998; Maxwell et al., 2006; Ojaba et al., 2002).

In operational terms, the massive food aid operation appears to have had less impact than expected (Maxwell et al., 2006). First, the timing of food aid delivery was often delayed: hampered by logistical problems and poor infrastructure, as well as from bureaucratic, political, security, and environmental constraints. Food aid often arrived late or at the wrong time entirely and in the wrong amounts, and ultimately they were not as effective as they might have been in terms of their intended purpose of mitigating malnutrition. Second, distribution methods were often not well-organised and were subject to local community politics in ways that much of the OLS system was poorly equipped to analyse and understand, which sometimes led to relief missing the most vulnerable members of communities. Efforts to target particular marginalised groups such as women or elderly people appear to have been limited; if they did exist, they were poorly tracked. That said, the complexity of the issues underpinning the lack of food were far beyond the scope of food aid to resolve, even had the aid been delivered in a perfectly fitting and timely manner (Maxwell and Burns, 2008). Lastly, the massive food operation was often not tied to any sustainable improvements in people's own livelihoods – and indeed controversy over whether it should be or not (Duffield, 2001).

While OLS allowed for better data collection than had previously taken place in many of the areas under its purview, it still lacked standardised and systematised data collection methods, and the quality of data it collected was often questionable (Aboum et al., 1990; Duffield et al., 2000; Karim et al., 1996). Particularly lacking was any data disaggregated by sex or other specific characteristics, as well as in-depth analysis of the contextual, social, political and livelihoods situation that would have been necessary to adequately assess needs, target aid and understand its impacts (Buchanan-Smith et al., 1999; Catley et al., 2005; Duffield et al., 2000; Karim et al., 1996). Such informational constraints as well as logistical constraints often led OLS to do what was feasible even if that did not match up with what was needed (Bradbury et al., 2000; Karim et al., 1996). As a result, some observers said, aid provision was far from impartial, but instead subject mainly to considerations of security and access.

### **3.2 Political constraints**

'Negotiated access' was both an innovative and problematic approach. It meant that OLS negotiated with the parties to the conflict themselves, and – despite on-going assertions around the impartiality and independence of aid – therefore had its activities restricted by the parties to the conflict. OLS had no way to act truly independently (Bradbury et al., 2000; Duffield et al., 2000; Aboum et al., 1990). During some of the most critical periods of the conflict, when aid may have been most needed, OLS was prevented from accessing affected populations in many areas (Bradbury et al., 2003; Buchanan-Smith et al., 1999; Johnson, 1994; Karim et al., 1996; Levine, 1997). This included areas of the Nuba

Mountains and Southern Blue Nile state. Of course, given the negotiated existence of OLS, there was no alternative other than delivering aid covertly or giving up on delivering aid altogether. Nevertheless, the very existence of OLS probably helped to enable access to some of these areas, even if access was not directly through OLS.

Critics argued that that the negotiation of access constituted 'the programmatic expression of the acceptance of continuing violence' (Bradbury et al., 2000: 34). GoS and other critics questioned the claim of neutrality in the face of OLS capacity-building and institution-building efforts with the SPLM/A and its Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (SRRA), leading ultimately to accusations that OLS was providing a non-state armed rebel movement with diplomatic recognition (Washburne, 2010; Bradbury et al., 2000; Macrae et al., 1997). Both criticisms are reasonable and suggest further evidence of the multiple objectives of the different parties behind OLS.

Both GoS and the rebel groups incorporated aid as a 'financial and military strategy' (Bradbury et al., 2000: 20), helping them 'to consolidate their hold over their respective populations' (Ojaba et al., 2002: 680). Rebel movements, chiefs, local administration, local relief structures and host populations were all involved in aid diversion, aid taxing, and redistribution and looting of aid (Bradbury, 1998; Bradbury et al., 2000; Duffield et al., 2000; Maxwell and Burns, 2008; Kevlihan, 2012). Some critics argue that OLS actually fuelled and prolonged the war, by providing a rich source of goods and funding that was easily exploited by the warring parties, including the SPLM/A, to legitimate their control over civilian populations (Prendergast, 1996; Bradbury et al., 2000; Duffield et al., 2000). But it also enabled the GoS to secure and consolidate its military position through the creation and support of IDP camps in the areas it controlled (Macrae et al., 1997). Critics also argued that too many operational decisions, particularly around engagement with the SPLM/A and other southern actors, were made based on donors' political goals rather than humanitarian criteria (Aboum et al., 2000).

### **3.3 Contradictory objectives**

Many of the operational and political concerns about OLS coalesce around the criticism that the objectives of the whole undertaking were always contested and divergent, which made it impossible to fully analyse or respond to its complex and dynamic circumstances. As a result, many of the actions taken under the OLS umbrella could not help but be somewhat contradictory and confused in both intent and outcomes.

One area in which OLS was criticised was the limited ownership of and participation in relief activities and decision-making by Sudanese institutions and beneficiaries. It was criticised for having passed over opportunities to hire local staff members in both the north and the south, and for having failed to adequately consider Sudanese observers' and beneficiaries' views (Bradbury et al., 2000; Duffield et al., 2000; Ntata, 1999). Though criticised for building the capacity of southern institutions, it was also faulted for treating the SRRA and other local institutions merely as channels for aid delivery, rather than partners (Aboum et al., 1990). The SPLM/A and SRRA said that OLS (in the southern sector) did not provide them with the opportunity to regulate and coordinate aid, but did allow them assume the de facto role of a government providing social services. In fact, some observers note that access to services substantially *increased* during the civil war (Deng, 2003) and, at least in some areas, *declined* after the CPA (Maxwell et al., 2014).

OLS was also criticised for a lack of neutrality. In the south, in particular, the programme went far beyond simply providing life-sustaining support to people caught in conflict. And the impacts of aid distribution practices had a profound effect on social relations in beneficiary communities. Aid and its allocation by chiefs, local administrators and the SRRA in IDP camps and rural contexts were said to increase the power and influence of the respective individuals (Duffield, 2002). A still larger problem

was that the power of chieftaincy and kinship systems were undermined by aid distribution practices and other OLS activities, partly because agencies tended to bypass chiefs to communicate and work instead with the young, educated and English-speaking community members (Harragin and Chol, 1998), which turned some local power relationships upside-down.

Similarly, the organisation of Relief Committees (RCs) in the southern sector during the years 1994-1999, and again after the CPA, often circumvented traditional community decision-making frameworks. The World Food Programme in particular mandated the inclusion of women and assigned the determination of aid allocation to an 'elected' woman called the *tiang wai* (woman with a stick) who would be told the number of households to select. Most observers agree that this system not only failed to reach the most vulnerable households, but also increased the vulnerability of the women: it put all the responsibility for aid inclusion and exclusion on the *tiang wai*, even though she would probably not have had any way of effectively assessing the circumstances of all the households in her community, as it was not part of her role in the community to know such information (Deng, 1999; Maxwell and Burns, 2008). The system was quite alien to local norms and social systems and it undermined the traditional chieftaincy with its built-in checks. It should be noted that this problem, and the organisation of Relief Committees (RCs) in the southern sector, led to an approach that utilised the lowest level local chiefs (called *gol* leaders in Dinka communities) in direct targeting and distribution – a recommendation growing out of the South Sudan Vulnerability Study (Harragin and Chol, 1998). Although not without its own issues, this system seemed to target vulnerability as well as could be managed. The point is that, while targeting issues remained a challenge, even a relatively large-scale operation like OLS could be flexible enough to learn from mistakes and try different approaches.

Another key criticism was the issue of aid dependency. This was very much related to the larger shift in the aid world in the mid-1990s from emergency relief to longer-term livelihoods and food security support – sometimes termed the 'relief-to-development continuum.' OLS tried to encourage less reliance on food aid distributions and more local food production, which it attempted to achieve by decreasing rations, limiting the number of distributions, and targeting more specifically, as well as investing more in 'development' projects, including agricultural support (Karim et al., 1996).

There were a number of problems with the relief-to-development shift. First and foremost, it seems in retrospect that much of the worry about 'dependency' *per se* was misplaced (Maxwell and Burns, 2008; Harvey and Lind, 2005) and illustrated a misunderstanding of coping strategies and social dynamics in recipient communities. The OLS review found that 'urging a developmental approach to relief has been driven by changing fashion in the aid world, rather than by any real knowledge of conditions in Sudan' (Karim et al., 1996; 5). Some critics suggested that the shift also resulted from declining OLS funding, and that international agencies then tried to justify their reduced engagement and reduced support of public services by claiming that it represented a more sustainable response, rather than admitting that the funding was being cut (Bradbury, 1998; Bailey and Harragin, 2009).

Second, the shift also manifested a misinterpretation of both the underpinnings and permanence of the crisis – treating it as a conflict based in poverty and underdevelopment to which technical solutions could be applied, and (with encouragement from GoS) misunderstanding the protracted nature of the humanitarian crisis as 'normalisation' of the situation (Bradbury, 1998; Duffield et al., 2000; Macrae et al., 1997; Johnson, 2011). These actions also 'forced a greater reliance among the Dinka on highly exploitative and non-sustainable forms of agricultural labour' as coping strategies, particularly in Darfur and Kordofan, (Duffield, 2002: 100). Duffield goes further to say that these supposedly sustainable and development-oriented policies actually undermined the southern Sudanese, supporting long-standing systems for their exploitation and abuse.

One of the most controversial points in the history of OLS was the creation of the 'Agreement on Ground Rules' and the establishment of explicit humanitarian principles on engagement between OLS and the main rebel groups in the southern sector, described earlier. Understandings of the purpose of the Ground Rules differed, ranging from being essentially a framework for ensuring the security of aid workers (Rolandsen, 2005) to being an expansive agenda for the propagation of humanitarian principles in wartime in general and for behaviour change among southern rebel groups in particular (Bradbury et al., 2000). Ultimately, the objectives of the Ground Rules meant different things to different people; the criteria by which to evaluate their success were therefore unclear as well (Bradbury et al., 2000). The Ground Rules are reproduced in full in Annex 1.

## 4 Positive outcomes and learning

In many ways, and despite its many weaknesses, OLS was a lesson in possibilities, creativity and tenacity in humanitarian relief efforts in complex emergencies. This section outlines a number of those positive aspects.

OLS was the first humanitarian relief effort mounted inside what international humanitarian law refers to as an active ‘non-international conflict’. Never before had negotiating access to a war zone during active conflict proved possible, and this development significantly expanded the realm of possibility surrounding emergency relief and humanitarian response (Minear, 1990). OLS was the first instance in which an intervention ‘dealt with sovereignty issues without challenging the fundamental authority of states’ (ibid: 99), which allowed for the possibility of reaching some of the worst-affected and most vulnerable populations in conflict zones with desperately-needed aid, rather than only being able to operate on the margins of conflict zones and reach those who had managed to flee. This sea change in humanitarianism still resonates today, as evidenced by recent headlines such as: ‘*Operation Lifeline Syria: Why the international community could be on the cusp of a humanitarian breakthrough in the Syria conflict* (Albright and Miliband, 2014, emphasis added). Over 25 years after OLS’s inception, it remains the clearest symbol of negotiated access for the provision of humanitarian assistance in war zones.

This literal and figurative opening of space for humanitarianism – complicated and controversial though it was and continues to be – along with the coordination capacity and official umbrella of the OLS brand, allowed a number of NGOs and donor governments to take part in providing aid in Sudan on a larger scale than any would or could have done on their own (Minear, 1990; Karim et al., 1996). It also allowed for the introduction of the concept of ‘humanitarian governance’, or the use of humanitarian aid and human rights principles to influence the behaviour of a state or of non-state actors (Lautze et al., 2004).

For all its challenges in effectively gathering and utilising data, OLS also generated far better information than had previously existed, partly because of basic issues of access and partly because of the more formalised information-gathering mandated by various aspects of the programme. This included the monitoring and investigation mechanisms built into the Ground Rules and the broader Humanitarian Principles Programme (Bradbury et al., 2000). The critical need for such data is clear: Johnson (2011) notes that pre-OLS reports on conditions in Sudan had been so inaccurate that early OLS resource appeals were dismissed as exaggerations. There was also a clear improvement in relief coordination that resulted from both this improved information as well as the more organised framework for cooperation among NGOs themselves that was a product OLS in general and the Ground Rules negotiations in particular. Despite the fact that OLS was riddled throughout its lifespan with internal divisions and divergent objectives, it also forced many aid actors to coordinate and work together more than they had ever had to in the past (Bradbury et al., 2000).

Leaving aside criticism that OLS did not address underlying causes or bring about the resolution of the conflict (which it was not intended to do), it arguably did have some peacebuilding dividends, even if in some cases they were somewhat coincidental. In the course of negotiating the Ground Rules, space was created for dialogue and a search for common ground between some of the warring factions, including the agreement (at least in principle) that civilian suffering should be minimised and that civilians should have access to aid and relief (Minear, 1990). On an even more practical level, it actually brought about de facto ceasefires in the ‘corridors of tranquility’ that were set up as safe passageways for aid delivery (ibid). These were essentially an ‘accidental by-product’ of OLS (Minear, 1990).

In addition, in the same way that OLS arguably opened up new conceptual space around the humanitarian principles, it may also have created space for dialogue around peace and peacebuilding that was useful to some Sudanese who were opposed to or troubled by the war. For them, the introduction of humanitarian intervention, and the debates around it, could be seen as 'a call for reason' about the terrible damage being done by the war and the urgency of ending the conflict (Minear 1990: 132).

Many observers have discussed the issue of OLS neutrality, both in overall and context-specific circumstances (Duffield, 2002; Duffield et al., 2000; Bradbury et al., 2000; Levine, 1997). Levine argues that 'if any lesson is to be learnt from OLS's experience, it is that the saving of life, easing of suffering and protection of civilians on all sides of conflict are best guaranteed by neutrality' (1997: 25). Kevlihan (2012), however, suggests an alternative approach, recognising that aid in conflict zones is highly likely to be strategically utilised by combatants; rather than allowing that likelihood to serve as a reason for minimising aid response, he argues that such conditions can and should be exploited for peacebuilding aims. That these observations are both valid makes the interpretation of neutrality even more difficult.

It is worth noting that there were areas in which OLS did not operate, such as parts of Unity and Upper Nile states in the south, which were controlled by other militia groups outside of the main SPLM/A factions. Also, a number of organisations with a significant presence in South Sudan throughout the war period were pointedly unaffiliated with OLS, and resisted almost any form of agreement with the government or other warring parties in favour of their own definitions of humanitarian independence. These organisations publicly criticised OLS on a number of occasions, questioning the possibility of neutrality or independence under conditions of negotiated access, as well as the premise that warring parties could operate according to humanitarian principles (e.g. Reuters, 1999). Other agencies emphasised solidarity with, for example, SPLM/A (ESPAC, 2000). Thus even more questions arose about the independence, neutrality or impartiality of the humanitarian effort more broadly.

Overall it is difficult to gauge the extent of analysis and learning in non-OLS aid operations, as internal review documents are much more limited compared to the abundant literature evaluating OLS. The areas in which none of the agencies operated were also, of course, beyond the scope of monitoring and learning by OLS or any other observers.

## 5 Application of ‘the lessons of OLS’

It would clearly be a gross oversimplification of both OLS and the current crisis in South Sudan to present ‘lessons learned’ in the manner of ‘do-this, don’t-do-that’ directives. One clear conclusion that emerges from a review of OLS was that there was no single ‘right’ way to do things even in that era – much less when trying to transpose anything learned then to the current context. Nevertheless, several major points do emerge from this review that are highly relevant now – with the strong caveat that their application requires an in-depth knowledge of the current context. This section briefly highlights the major points.

First, **the Ground Rules were the centrepiece of OLS, but there was no clear mechanism then for enforcing them**, and nothing in the past two decades has made the enforcement of negotiated agreements any more possible or predictable. **Such agreements depend on continuous discussions and negotiations.** Conducting this kind of negotiation on behalf of a fractious and divided humanitarian community – to say nothing of the objectives of donors, host country governments and non-state actors – is a fraught process. There is inevitably a certain ‘damned-if-you-do, and-damned-if-you-don’t’ element to the choices that have to be made. There are better or worse options to be negotiated, but no perfect options: any negotiated outcome is by definition a compromise of objectives among divergent actors – actors who don’t really change their own ultimate objectives even if they agree to a compromise.

Second, with regard to reviews of OLS, some observers argued that OLS prolonged the conflict through conferring legitimacy on fighting groups that might have been defeated sooner had they not been legitimised by OLS. On the other hand, many also argue that the legitimacy conferred on these groups by OLS led to a stronger CPA. Any negotiated access agreement is likely to be pushed and pulled in multiple directions. From a humanitarian perspective, this is problematic, but better than not having access to conflict-affected populations at all. It is unrealistic to think that a negotiated compromise is going to prevent aid diversion, distortion or political manipulation **and humanitarian agencies should plan for these contingencies, rather than thinking that an ideal negotiated agreement will make them go away.** All actors in the fray try to capture the ‘halo effect’ of providing humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected people *in extremis*, but also seek to advance their parallel objectives – often the end to which humanitarian assistance is merely a means. The important point from OLS is about minimising the diversion, distortion and manipulation – not expecting that they will go away. Coordination is key, but the constraints have to do with differing objectives of powerful players behind the scenes of humanitarian action.<sup>1</sup>

Third, the above notwithstanding, there is a difference between providing assistance to conflict- or crisis-affected populations, and trying to build sustainable institutions or lay the groundwork for peace. The integrated set of principles on which OLS was based is oriented mainly at access for the provision of assistance. OLS was criticised both for failing to be neutral *and* for failing to build sustainable institutions in the south. But it probably would have been impossible to do both well at the same time with the same instruments. Multiple objectives are a constraint to deal with; but in retrospect some of OLS’s objectives were barely compatible (though some argued otherwise at the time, insisting that capacity building was also needed and possible in areas controlled by the GoS). The issue and purpose of neutrality as a means of humanitarian access – and the issue of issue of using humanitarian

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<sup>1</sup> The politicisation and manipulation of aid neither began nor ended with OLS. For a long-term perspective on this issue, see Donini (2012).



assistance in wartime to address developmental issues – continue to be controversial but are no less important today than they were 25 years ago.<sup>2</sup>

Fourth, OLS was implemented in the era when ‘do no harm’ principles were taking hold, and to some degree this was reflected in its rhetoric and outcomes. But protection of civilians is much more explicit in today’s humanitarian operations than it was during OLS (where the overt intent was much more about providing material assistance). This means that civil-military relations are very different today than they were during OLS (and there was no equivalent protection force during the OLS era – as UNMISS is intended to be today). **If anything, incorporation of protection into negotiated access discussions makes them more fraught, not less.**

Fifth, OLS was vulnerable to donor politics and inconsistencies of funding, leading to short-term shifts in approach. Ideally, humanitarian decision-making would be clear, consistent and evidence-based, but is often at the mercy of forces outside of humanitarian control. Contingency plans should take these forces into consideration. OLS demonstrated that it was possible to deliver aid to people caught in conflict, rather than dealing only with refugees who had fled it. This did not prevent widespread displacement, but it arguably reduced both the numbers of displaced and the distance they had to go to find safety or assistance. The takeaway is that it is possible to deliver aid within active conflict zones, but humanitarians have sometimes been too timid about negotiating with armed actors to secure access.

Sixth, OLS had almost no way of knowing how it was doing, other than tracking the delivery of relief shipments to their final destinations. Although this varied by organisation, overall OLS was severely constrained in terms of assessing its own impact. **Effective monitoring and evaluation of relief activities, inclusion of data disaggregated by sex, age and other social characteristics, and methods of capturing and disseminating learning are essential to effective operations.** M&E systems have improved significantly since the time of OLS – though information and data continue to constrain assessment and analysis of the current situation in South Sudan.

Seventh, **negotiations over access, before and including the Ground Rules, created pockets of relative peace** – sort of ‘accidental’ ceasefires. These allowed the creation of some governance structures that were quite unlikely otherwise, which in turn improved the delivery of aid and ultimately contributed to the building of sustainable institutions. This was not without controversy, but most observers suggest that this was a positive – albeit perhaps unintended – outcome in the long term. Based on these governance structures, contemporary government structures emerged.

Eighth, the issue of humanitarian assistance conferring legitimacy on the political institutions through which the assistance is proffered has significant implications for the present. One clear lesson from OLS relates to **the recognition of traditional authorities as a bridge between humanitarian efforts and affected communities.**

OLS was a watershed in approaches to humanitarian intervention. It is difficult to know the extent to which lessons learned from the various formal and informal reviews of OLS were incorporated into its on-going activities and have been integrated into other humanitarian response operations. In some ways, the field has changed little since then, while in others, it has changed quite significantly. Humanitarian access is still a major hurdle in many crises, as the previous reference to the ‘Operation Lifeline Syria’ headline suggests. The security of aid workers continues to be threatened, and in many ways the situation is far worse today than it was in the 1990s (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2014). Other

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<sup>2</sup> Today many of these issues come together under the rubric of ‘resilience’ programming and policy. But there remains an unresolved debate about the extent to which ‘resilience’ programming can address conflict hazards or whether it is best left to addressing short-term economic and natural hazards and the longer-term effects of poverty and climate change (see for example, Barrett and Constat, 2013).

differences are notable as well: a stronger humanitarian coordination mechanism through OCHA and the Office of the Humanitarian Coordinator, a stronger discourse around civilian protection and, of course, the added factor of UNMISS.

But some things are still fairly similar: OLS agencies worked in a complex and varied operating environment, with relatively short turnover times for international staff. This made organisational learning and institutional memory even more important, but the limited evidence suggested that organisational learning was an obstacle. This is clearly still a factor, as is the on-going need to negotiate humanitarian access among parties in conflict, critical humanitarian needs (and indeed the risk of another famine), and logistical constraints that are largely similar to those faced by OLS. Perhaps the final clear take-away point from a review of OLS is that it is worth the effort to attempt to institutionalise learning – particularly in a context with high staff turnover and the need for good collaboration and coordination among agencies.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [The Sudan Open Archive](#) initiated and curated by the Rift Valley Institute has attempted to capture as much of this learning as possible. Many of the documents cited in this paper are found on the archive, and indeed it is the only place where digitised copies are found.

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# Annex 1. SPLM/OLS Agreement on Ground Rules<sup>4</sup>

[NB. The example which follows is the agreement signed between the SPLM/OLS. Although signed separately the content of the agreements with other movements was to all intents and purposes the same.]

This agreement is intended to lay out the basic principles upon which Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) works and to lay out the rules and regulations resulting from such principles. It seeks to define the minimum acceptable standards of conduct for the activities of OLS agencies and Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA), as the official counterpart in areas controlled by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).

We, the undersigned enter into this agreement in a spirit of good faith and mutual cooperation in order to improve the delivery of humanitarian assistance to and protection of civilians in need.

In signing this agreement we express our support for the following international humanitarian conventions and their principles namely:

- i Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989
- ii Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the 1977 Protocols additional to the Geneva Conventions

## A. Statement of Humanitarian Principles

- 1 The fundamental objective of OLS and SRRA is the provision of humanitarian assistance to populations in need wherever they may be. Such humanitarian assistance seeks to save life, to ease suffering, to promote self-reliance, self-sufficiency and the maintenance of livelihoods. The right to receive humanitarian assistance and to offer it is a fundamental humanitarian principle.
- 2 The guiding principle of OLS and SRRA is that of humanitarian neutrality – an independent status for humanitarian work beyond political or military considerations. In other words:
  - i Humanitarian aid must be given according to considerations of human need alone. Its granting or its acceptance must not be made dependent on political factors or upon race, religion, ethnicity or nationality. It must not seek to advance any political agenda. Where humanitarian assistance is inadequate to meet the needs of all priority must be given to the most vulnerable.
  - ii The passage of humanitarian assistance to populations in need should not be denied even if this requires that aid passes through an area controlled by one party in order to reach the needy in another area provided that such passage is not used for military advantage.
  - iii Relief assistance is provided solely on the basis of need: those providing assistance do not affiliate themselves to any side in the ongoing conflict.
  - iv The only constraints on responding to humanitarian need should be those of resources and practicality.
- 3 All humanitarian assistance provided is for the use of identified civilian beneficiaries. Priority must at all times be given to women and children and other vulnerable groups such as the elderly, disabled and displaced people.

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<sup>4</sup> This annex was downloaded in its entirety from [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org). No other title or background information was provided with this document.

- 4 Those carrying out relief activities under the auspices of OLS must be accountable to the beneficiaries and their representative structures in first place, and to those who fund the activities. This places the following obligations on the various parties:
  - i Those rendering humanitarian aid have a duty to ensure its appropriate end use. This includes a right to monitor and participate in the distribution of humanitarian aid on the ground in partnership with SRRRA.
  - ii Local authorities through the SRRRA must ensure that aid is distributed fairly to civilian beneficiaries. Diversion of aid from intended beneficiaries is regarded as a breach of humanitarian principles.
  - iii Decision-making on the selection of beneficiaries and the monitoring of the use of inputs and resources must be and be seen to be transparent and responsive to broad-based decision-making at the level of affected communities. Local authorities and relief agencies should involve local representatives of communities in the processes of targeting and monitoring of aid. Where possible this should be done through the Joint Relief and Rehabilitation Committees which include elected community representatives.
- 5 OLS is based on the complete transparency of all its activities. This means that local authorities have the right to expect that OLS agencies provide full information regarding the resources to be provided. In return, it is expected that local authorities will report honestly and fairly in all their dealings with OLS with respect to needs identified populations in need use of resources etc.
- 6 All humanitarian actions should be tailored to local circumstances and aim to enhance not supplant locally available resources and mechanisms. Strengthening local capacity to prevent future crises and emergencies and to promote greater involvement of Sudanese institutions and individuals in all humanitarian actions is an integral part of OLS's humanitarian mandate.
- 7 The fundamental human right of all persons to live in safety and dignity must be affirmed and supported through appropriate measures of protection as well as relief. All those involved in OLS must respect and uphold international humanitarian law and fundamental human rights.
- 8 Bona fide staff members of OLS agencies and others living working or travelling in Sudan under the auspices of OLS have the right to go about their business freely and without restraint provided that they adhere to these Ground Rules and to local laws and customs. In all their dealings relief workers and local authorities must demonstrate mutual respect.

## **B. Mutual Obligations**

- 1 All externally supported programmes and projects in SPLM/A-controlled areas must be approved by the SRRRA (both locally and at SRRRA head office) prior to their implementation. NGOs or UN agencies are responsible for ensuring that such approval is obtained in writing. Project implementation should be based upon a letter of understanding between the agency, SRRRA and OLS which defines roles responsibilities and commitments of all sides plus procedures for resolving differences and grievances.
- 2 All UN/NGO workers are expected to act in accordance with the humanitarian principles previously defined: provision of aid according to need, neutrality, impartiality, accountability and transparency. This includes non-involvement in political/military activity. NGOs and UN agencies must not act or divulge information in a manner that will jeopardise the security of the area.
- 3 All UN/NGO workers must show respect for cultural sensitivities and for local laws and customs. Relief agencies must ensure that their staff are familiar with these laws and customs.
- 4 UN agencies and NGOs shall strive to offer the highest possible standards of service to their beneficiaries. This means that all agencies commit themselves to recruiting only those staff judged to have adequate technical and personal skills and experience required for their work.
- 5 UN agencies and NGOs must ensure that all their staff living, working or visiting Sudan are bearers of valid entry passes from the respective political authorities.
- 6 The SRRRA must commit itself to the humanitarian principles defined above and not allow itself to be motivated by political, military or strategic interests. It should seek to provide an

efficient and effective coordinated information and planning service for relief and rehabilitation activities.

- 7 The SPLM/A recognises and respects the humanitarian and impartial nature of UN agencies and those NGOs which have signed a letter of understanding with UNICEF/OLS and SRRA.
- 8 The SRRA should facilitate the flow of relief goods and services and provide accurate and timely information regarding the needs and the situation of civilians in their areas.
- 9 Local authorities assume full responsibility through the SRRA for the safety and protection of relief workers in areas under their control. This responsibility includes:
  - i providing an immediate alert to relief workers in potentially insecure areas
  - ii facilitation of safe relocation when necessary
  - iii protection from any form of threat, harassment or hostility from any source: relief staff or agencies are not expected to pay for such protection either of themselves or of their property.
- 10 UN/NGO compounds should be respected as property of these institutions. Those living in these compounds have the right to privacy and compounds should only be entered with the permission of their residents. No military or political activity should take place in these compounds and no personnel bearing arms may enter them except when the safety or their residents is threatened.

### C. Use of relief property and supplies

- 1
  - i All UN/NGO property including vehicles and property hired by UN/NGOs is to be controlled and moved at the discretion of UN/NGOs or their agencies, unless such property is formally donated to another party. Project agreements between NGOs, SRRA and UN/OLS should clearly define which assets will remain the property of the agency concerned and which are project assets which must remain in Sudan even when the agency concerned leaves temporarily or permanently.
  - ii Those assets defined as agency assets remain the effective property of the agency at all times and may be removed whenever a project terminates or an agency withdraws from a location for whatever reason.
  - iii Project assets are those which are for direct use by project beneficiaries or are integral to the running and sustainability of the project. These goods remain the property of UN/NGOs until formally handed over to the SRRA or local communities and their leaders' decisions regarding the distribution and use of such items should be made whenever possible jointly between NGOs and local authorities under the auspices of the Joint Relief and Rehabilitation Committee following the humanitarian principles stated above.
- 2 UN and NGO flags are for exclusive use by these agencies.
- 3 UN and NGO staff will be allowed unrestricted access to their communication equipment and to exercise normal property rights. Except for emergencies, all messages should be written and recorded. Use of UN/NGO radios or other communication equipment will be limited to information on relief activities only. All messages will be in the English language. Operation shall be by a locally designated radio operator seconded and selected jointly by the local authorities and relief agencies. Whenever necessary UN/NGO personnel will be allowed to transmit their own messages.
- 4 No armed or uniformed personnel is allowed to travel on UN/NGO vehicles, planes, boats or cars. This includes those vehicles contracted by UN/NGOs.

### D. Employment of staff

- 1 All UN agencies and NGOs have the right to hire their own staff as direct employees. These agencies should be encouraged to employ appropriately qualified and experienced Sudanese as part of a capacity building strategy.



- 2 In the cases of Sudanese staff seconded to an NGO supported project (e.g. health staff) appointments and dismissals are made by the local authority in consultation with the agency which is expected to support payment of that worker's incentives. The number of workers to be supported must be agreed jointly. An NGO or a UN agency may ask the local authorities to withdraw seconded staff considered incompetent dishonest or otherwise unsuitable for their jobs.
- 3 Local authorities should ensure that the Sudanese staff of UN/NGOs and especially those staff who receive special training programmes to upgrade and improve their skills are exempted whenever possible from military or other service so that they can contribute to the welfare of the civilian population.

#### **E. Rents, Taxes, Licences, Protection money**

- 1 No UN/NGO should be expected to pay rent for buildings or areas which are part of their work, for example, offices or stores when they have built these buildings themselves or where they are donated by the local authority.
- 2 In the case of public buildings which are being rented by an NGO as living accommodation a reasonable rent may be paid by the NGO/UN agency to the civil administration. Genuine efforts should be made to make moves towards standardisation of these rents.
- 3 All OLS agencies shall be exempt from customs duties for supplies (including personal supplies) and equipment brought into Sudan. Any taxes to be paid will be agreed between the agency concerned and the local authority as party of the project agreement.

#### **F. Implementation of this agreement**

- 1 All signatories to this agreement must accept responsibility for ensuring that it is disseminated to all their officials and staff working in Sudan. It should also be publicised in public places in Sudan to ensure that local communities and beneficiaries understand its principles and rules.
- 2 UNICEF/OLS together with the SRRA will be responsible for ensuring the holding of workshops and meetings in all key locations in which the principles and rules of this agreement are explained and discussed with all relevant personnel.
- 3 The SRRA is fully responsible for ensuring compliance with this agreement by the local authorities and communities.
- 4 Joint Relief and Rehabilitation Committees established in all relief centres and involving all relevant actors should meet together on a regular basis to plan implement and monitor the delivery of humanitarian assistance. These committees will be regarded as the custodians of the principles of this agreement at local level and responsible for ensuring that the rules are upheld and respected by all sides.

#### **G. Mechanisms for resolving alleged violations of Ground Rules**

- 1 In cases where allegations of non-compliance with this agreement are made, all parties commit themselves to resolving differences as speedily as possible in an attitude of good faith.
- 2 Where alleged violations of Ground Rules have occurred the allegation should be documented in writing by the complainant.
- 3 The issue should then be taken to the local Joint Relief and Rehabilitation Committee where this exists.
- 4 If unresolved it should then be discussed at local level with meetings between the area secretary of the SRRA the county Commissioner and the local head of the UN/NGO together with the UNICEF/OLS Resident Project Officer where appropriate.
- 5 If the issue remains unresolved at local level it should be referred to central authorities in writing to be dealt with by the senior officials of the agencies concerned i.e. the SRRA head office, the head of the NGO and, if appropriate the UNICEF/OLS coordinator.



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