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# Breaking Out of the Borderlands

## Understanding migrant pathways from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, South Sudan

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This report was written by Nicki Kindersley and Joseph Diing Majok with Samuel Nicola Cornelio, Marko Dut Garang and Santino Garang Akot.

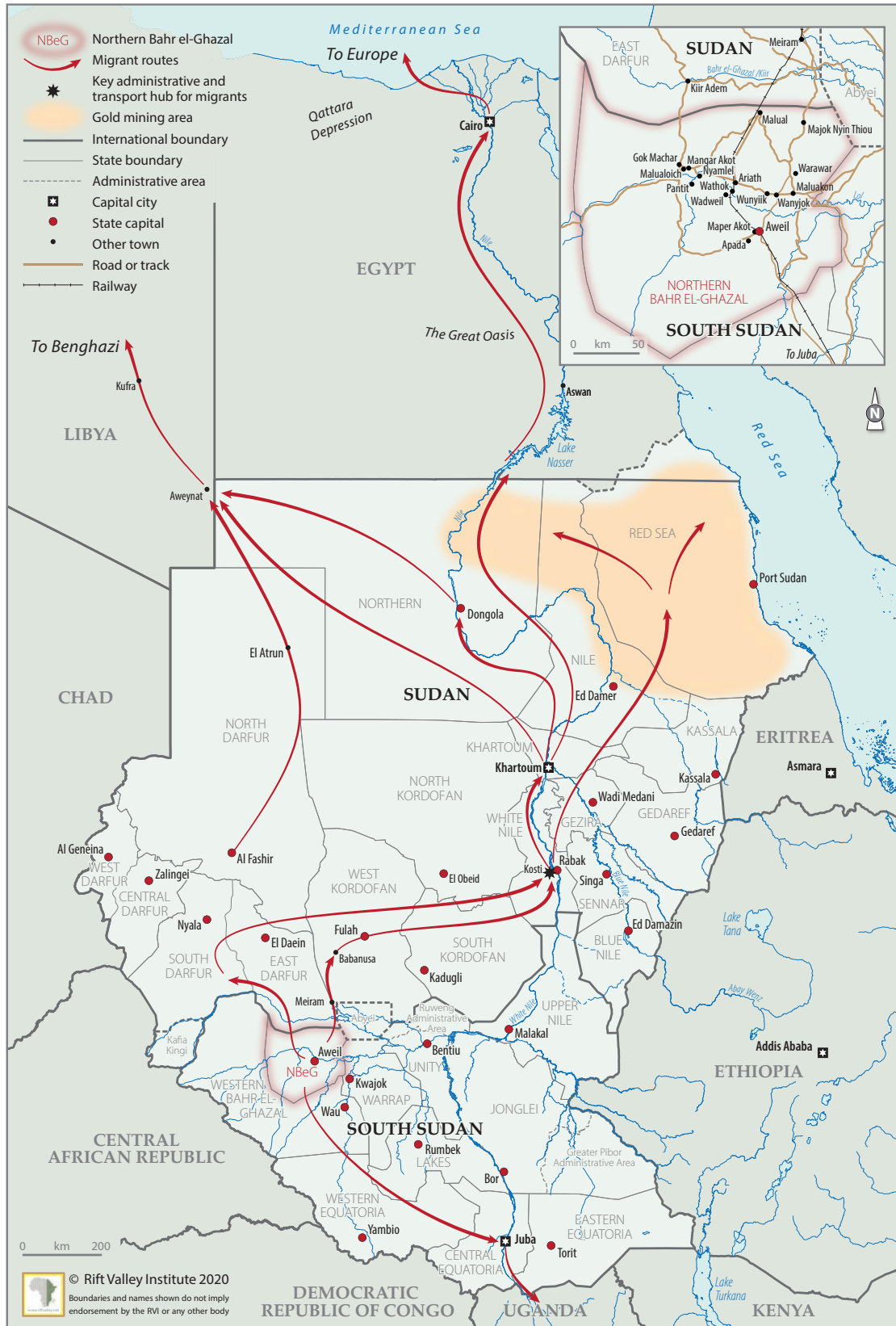
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# Migrant pathways from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal



## Summary

- The monetization of land, life and work on the borderlands of South Sudan has pushed many of its poor residents into insecure waged labour, precarious systems of rent and high interest short-term loans. This economy strongly benefits new cash-rich elites, who profit from this market of cheap workers, land and rental income.
- Young people—both women and men—are particularly dependent on this cash work and have few options for education or personal development within South Sudan. This makes them easily recruited by government authorities (particularly the military) and local elites for low-waged labour, especially work that requires them to be armed.
- This economy has created a pool of desperate young people in search of a way to break out of this captive market. This is the foundation for the expansion of military and migrant labour across the region, as young men and women cross national borders in their search for work, education and other opportunities.
- The decision to leave South Sudan on long-distance migrant pathways—towards Sudan, Egypt, Libya and Europe—can only be understood within the context of this militarized borderland economy. Long-distance migration, and military work in Sudan or further afield in Libya and Egypt, are often more viable than the immediate possibilities in South Sudan.
- Many young men and women move north, taking on the risks of abuse and coercive militia recruitment, to seek out informal employment and military work in Sudan. Onward travel to Libya and across the Mediterranean is fuelled by desperation for a better future, and the decision to take the ultimate personal risk.
- Young migrant workers rely on mutual support and networks of information and care to survive. Due to distance and financial stress, these systems are now under strain. Collective action to bargain for cooperatively organized work, employment rights, and wider political and economic reforms is beyond the power of most South Sudanese people.

This study has three main implications for current international engagement with South Sudan, specifically with its refugees and migrant workers:

- Humanitarian and developmental work on agricultural subsistence, individual resilience and entrepreneurship, and promoting state border controls, often helps perpetuate the existence of a captive labour market. This serves the interests of wealthy local and national individuals, including powerful political-military elites, in their economic and military investments.

- Security sector reform (SSR) cannot be undertaken without a detailed understanding of the cross-border labour markets that trap and encourage desperate young men into armed work (whether in government or rebel service). The military and security sector must be understood as a key employment sector and formative workplace for young men and women.
- Efforts for fundamental political reform and civil society investments must engage with local political and economic analysis. For most extremely poor young men and women on borderlands of South Sudan, resistance to violent rule, economic precarity and other limitations on their aspirations and personal safety, involves out-migration to Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, Libya or beyond.

# 1. Introduction

South Sudan, along with many of its neighbouring countries in north-east Africa, faces a seemingly intractable economic crisis. Cycles of civil war and brokered elite peace deals since 2013 have entrenched widespread economic breakdown with locally specific dynamics. This has resulted in increased security surveillance, repression and control. It has also encouraged sustained armed recruitment and out-migration across national borders for survival.

This research project aims to understand the dynamics of this protracted economic and political crisis from the perspective of poor residents in the conflict-affected borderland of South Sudan and southern Darfur in Sudan. The study asks two core questions: First, how do residents in the borderlands of South Sudan seek survival, welfare and better lives in the economies and cross-border migrant pathways available to them? Second, how do young men and women navigate the risks of migrant and military work across South Sudan, Sudan and further afield?

The pathways of young people into migrant and military work in South Sudan, across the border with Sudan and towards Egypt, Libya and onwards are catalyzed and connected by the repressive structures of the economic system in the South Sudan borderlands. This report begins with a description of the exploitative economy that traps and impoverishes residents on this borderland. It is this economy that frames the decisions and pathways of the young men and women who seek work and lives elsewhere.

The report then follows these young people to militarized livelihoods in Juba, across the border to Darfur and Khartoum, through the peri-urban settlements and gold mining fields in Sudan, and onwards to Egypt, Libya, Chad and beyond. The report concludes with an exploration of the borderland migrant networks that keep people alive and connected through these pathways and choices.

## 2. Methodology

The report presents an analysis of the political and economic systems of the migrant labour pathways that cross South Sudan, Sudan, Egypt and the wider region. It draws directly from the perspectives of young men and women who live and work in different locations—from the farms and cattle camps of Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, to the communities of South Sudanese migrants in Khartoum.<sup>1</sup> The research project upon which this report is based emphasizes that understanding migration across the Horn of Africa requires knowledge of the political and economic structures at home that shape the choices people make. It also requires a detailed understanding of the worldview of migrant workers themselves.

The project grew out of a previous (2018–2019) study on the dynamics of economic crisis in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderlands with South Darfur in Sudan. This study examined the evolution and dynamics of the exploitative borderland economy and waged labour systems that have pushed residents into chronic precarity.<sup>2</sup> As an extension of the 2018–2019 research, this project looks at the development of long-distance migrant pathways out of the borderland, focusing on the different factors that persuade young people to leave. Alongside this, it also examines the logic of the decisions they make while on these often dangerous routes.

The lead researchers—Joseph Diing Majok and Nicki Kindersley—co-designed a multi-site research plan that interviewed migrant workers in: former Northern Bahr el-Ghazal state, South Sudan; at a number of de facto crossing and stopping points for migrant workers on the disputed border with South Darfur and West Kordofan in Sudan; and also in Juba and Khartoum, where migrants often end this section of their journey (some leave Sudan and continue to Egypt, or attempt to reach Europe).<sup>3</sup>

The research is based on a detailed protocol and question guide, built collaboratively with co-researchers Marko Dut Garang and Santino Garang Akot in Aweil, and Samuel

1 The report builds on recent theoretical approaches by Wale Adebani, 'Approaching the Political Economy of Everyday Life: An Introduction', in *The Political Economy of Everyday Life in Africa*, ed. Wale Adebani, Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer Limited, 2018, 1–32; Stefano Bellucci and Bill Freund, 'Introduction. Work across Africa: Labour Exploitation and Mobility in Southern, Eastern and Western Africa', *Africa* 87/01 (February 2017): 27–35; Frederick Cooper, 'From Enslavement to Precarity? The Labour Question in African History', in *The Political Economy of Everyday Life in Africa*, ed. Wale Adebani, Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer Limited, 2018, 135–56.

2 Nicki Kindersley and Joseph Diing Majok, 'Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan's Borderlands', London: Rift Valley Institute, June 2019.

3 This research was conducted when South Sudan was divided into 32 states. At the time of publication, South Sudan now has 10 states, with significant uncertainty over the future of these states. This study uses the geographic reference of the former Northern Bahr el-Ghazal state area throughout this report. The fieldwork was conducted in three states: Lol, Aweil and Aweil East.



Nicola Cornelio in Khartoum. The team met with people across the Aweil borderlands, in Juba and in Khartoum suburbs and camps for displaced people in August and September 2019. Sixty-four individual interviews and 23 group conversations were conducted across Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, and 10 individual interviews were carried out in Juba and 12 in Khartoum. In total, 121 people were interviewed as part of the research, with other observations and notes also made throughout the process.

The interviews were generally open or semi-structured discussions, ranging from between 45 minutes to several hours. Interviewees included young women and men working on farms, in cattle camps, restaurants and markets; in current and former military and militia service; in the police and security services; in local government; in gold mining and seasonal agricultural employment; and in various forms of education. Researchers sought to achieve a gender balance in interviews by prioritizing conversations with women, particularly in markets, at border points and in agricultural areas.

Interviews focused on the personal histories and working lives of the respondents—tracing the travel and displacement histories of young men and women, and their social networks across East Africa and further afield. A range of subjects were discussed, including planning and information gathering around economic opportunities and risks; tactics for crossing national borders safely; and their networks of support and mutual aid that exist across the region. Questions related to military and security work—particularly its opportunities and risks—were introduced alongside other employment options. This approach sets the security sector in its economic context, as a form of work, seeking to explain how militarized and armed labour fits within the wider regional political economy.

The report is constructed around the words and views of young men and women working along these borderland migrant pathways. It builds on an extensive literature on the region and global analyses of borderland studies and migrant labour. The key findings and implications were developed by the research team in analysis sessions in Aweil and Juba, and by telephone in Khartoum. The report is co-written by Joseph Diing Majok and Nicki Kindersley, and peer reviewed by Martina Santschi, Samson Wassara and Brendan Tuttle.

### 3. The borderland economy

In South Sudan, and beyond its borders, young men and women find many pathways into migrant and military work. These pathways are underpinned and catalyzed by the repressive local economy in the Bahr el-Ghazal borderland with southern Darfur in Sudan. Understanding and engaging with these migrant and military workers requires a clear structural understanding of these exploitative rural borderland economic systems.

These economic systems are not static. South Sudanese families have faced several cumulative cycles of conflicts and mass recruitments, displacement and flight, and return resettlements and reconstructions over the last thirty years. This immediate personal and family history is not just a massive societal and political challenge, it has also fundamentally reshaped economies across the country.

People in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal region on the north-west border with Darfur have spent years rebuilding their lives, homes and family security after cycles of regional conflict and famine raiding by the Murahaleen—a militia organized by Baggara (Misseriya and Rizeigat) pastoral communities in southern Darfur and Kordofan, funded by the Khartoum government—in the 1980s. The conflicts and famines broke apart families and destroyed the personal wealth, homes, agricultural investments and relationships of many people. Some fled northwards into farm work in Darfur and Kordofan, and urban wage labour in Khartoum; others fled eastward into Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA)—the main armed group fighting the Khartoum government—and other militia-held territories, helping to build a wartime rebel administration that was the foundation for post-peace reconstruction after 2005.<sup>4</sup>

After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2005 between the SPLA and the government in Khartoum, around half a million war-displaced people returned to Northern Bahr el-Ghazal state.<sup>5</sup> This rapid repopulation created new villages and suburbs, particularly of returning refugees and displaced people who had worked in cash economies in towns and industrial farms across Sudan and Egypt, and who had gained urban skills. Many young men and women, born in displacement and with primarily urban skill sets, struggled to re-establish homes and small village businesses. Military recruitment of underemployed young men continued between 2005 to 2012 (when South Sudan and Sudan fought a shorter border conflict). This was first undertaken by militias affili-

4 Kindersley and Majok, ‘Monetized Livelihoods’, 10–12.

5 See Larissa Carol Meier, ‘Returning to Northern Bahr El Ghazal, South Sudan: Approaching Post-Conflict Return from the Perspective of Young Adults, PhD thesis, Lund University, 2013. Accessed 27 October 2014, <http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=3798928&fileId=3798940>; Sara Pantuliano, ‘Going Home: Land, Return and Reintegration in Southern Sudan and the Three Areas’, in *Uncharted Territory Land, Conflict and Humanitarian Action*, ed. Sara Pantuliano, Bourton on Dunsmore, England: Practical Action Publishing, 2009.

ated with the South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF), a militia coalition that had fought the SPLA during the 1983–2005 war and hoped to be integrated into the post-peace army and security services.<sup>6</sup> Later, the SPLA took over recruitment on the disputed border between Sudan and South Sudan as tensions escalated between 2008 and 2012. Mass resettlement and reconstruction also required investment: People needed to find funds to break open old agricultural ground, pay for house construction and education in state and private schools, and restart businesses.

These cycles of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction have monetized society, shifting families from self-production to market dependence. This includes selling food crops and other locally produced goods, such as mats, bricks, charcoal and metalwork. Others have become involved in the long-distance trade of commodities such as fuel, clothes and pharmaceutical drugs. Most people are now tied to this market economy, relying on cash to buy food, service debts and (particularly for younger people) finance their education.<sup>7</sup> As borderland resident Wol emphasizes, ‘Nowadays, money becomes everything.’<sup>8</sup>

The end of this post-war reconstruction period also coincided with the oil shutdown in South Sudan in mid-2012, starting a national slide into inflation (and hyperinflation in 2015). Market prices for food now consistently outstrip wage rises, forcing people into longer working hours for the same resources, and limiting their time and energy for other investments.<sup>9</sup> These dynamics mean that for many people stress levels are chronically high: ‘Our currency became photocopied money’,<sup>10</sup> and ‘Now, everything is falling apart. It is hard to feed your family and to keep your business running.’<sup>11</sup>

The monetization of land, life and work in this reconstructed borderland has undermined local social security, built an economy that strongly benefits new cash-rich elites, and created forms of insecurity and dependency that are useful to military and government authorities. They are able to exploit desperate young people in military and migrant work, within and beyond the borders of South Sudan.

6 Institute for Security Studies, ‘The South Sudan Defence Force (SSDF): A Challenge to the Sudan Peace Process’, Situation Report, Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 8 April 2004. Accessed 27 November 2016, <https://issafrica.org/research/situation-reports/situation-report-the-south-sudan-defence-force-ssdf-a-challenge-to-the-sudan-peace-process>; Matthew B. Arnold, ‘The South Sudan Defence Force: Patriots, Collaborators or Spoilers?’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 45/4 (2007): 489–516.

7 For more on this process, see Edward Thomas, ‘Moving Towards Markets: Cash, Commodification and Conflict in South Sudan’, London: Rift Valley Institute, June 2019.

8 Interview with Wol, Aweil-origin migrant worker, Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 28 September 2019. Names have been abbreviated or changed to protect the anonymity of interviewees.

9 Interview with Angelina, farmer, Alel, 30 August 2019.

10 Interview with Ayom, cattle trader, Aweil, 4 September 2019.

11 Interview with Peter, market trader representative, Udhum, 9 September 2019.

## The monetization of land and work

During the process of reconstruction since 2005, as families rebuilt their homes and lives, residents sought a careful balance between self-production during the wet agricultural season and wage labour (for cash) during the dry season. Wage labour included clearing new farmlands for other farmers, working in markets selling imported and locally produced goods, or harvesting cash crops such as sesame and groundnut for commercial farmers. Harvesting is low-wage labour and was paid at a daily rate of SSP 300 (roughly USD 1.00 on the local market) in the 2019 season.<sup>12 13</sup>

During the reconstruction period, the dynamics around agricultural work changed. As poorer families struggled to access good farmland and prepare it for cultivation, richer residents began to use cash to buy up land and invest in large-scale farms. In particular, this happened in highly fertile areas such as Alel—an ancestral area of the minority Luo ethnicity about 10 km west of Aweil town—which had been evacuated due to raiding in the 1980s and 1990s. When people returned after 2007, Luo landholders distributed areas of wild land to formerly displaced people to clear for cultivation. Since 2010, cash-rich investors have targeted the area for large-scale land purchase.<sup>14</sup> This rate of land privatization has increased since about 2012.<sup>15</sup> Land has been reclaimed from returnee settlers, and new owners have begun to charge rent, sell plots to cash investors and turn their new private property into large individually owned farms.<sup>16</sup> Renting land, formerly a relatively unusual phenomenon, has become common, in particular for very poor farmer residents in Alel.<sup>17</sup>

12 Exchange rates in this report are all approximate and reflect the local rates in Aweil during fieldwork in August and September 2019. Please note that exchange rates in both Sudan and South Sudan are volatile and the rates quoted here do not remain constant over time.

13 In 2019, cultivating a *feddan* (unit of area measuring approximately 60 m x 70 m) of land was paid at SSP 3,000 and harvesting the same area was paid at SSP 3,000 (USD 10), both equivalent to a month of steady part time work for the average worker. A *qoth* (a rectangular area of land measuring about 4.6 m x 3 m) is set at SSP 300–400 (USD 1.00–1.30) for cultivation and the same for harvesting. An average full-time worker might be able to earn between SSP 1,000–2,500 per day (USD 3.30–8.30). For example, Nyaror, a middle-aged military widow, balances collecting and selling wild fruits when they are in season with work on a large-scale individually owned farm, cultivating three to four *qoths* a day; interview with Nyaror, Nyalath agricultural area, 3 September 2019.

14 Interview with Angelina, farmer, Alel, 30 August 2019.

15 See: David K Deng, 'Housing, Land and Property Disputes in South Sudan: Findings from a survey Nimule, Torit, Wau and Yei', Juba: South Sudan Law Society, March 2019. Accessed 30 September 2020, <https://www.southsudanpeaceportal.com/repository/housing-land-and-property-disputes-in-south-sudan-findings-from-a-survey-nimule-torit-wau-and-yei/>; Peter Hakim Justin and Mathijs van Leeuwen, 'The Politics of Displacement-Related Land Conflict in Yei River County, South Sudan', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 54/03 (2016): 419–442; Jörg Gertel, Richard Rottenburg, and Sandra Calkins, eds., *Disrupting Territories: Land, Commodification & Conflict in Sudan*, Woodbridge: James Curry, 2014.

16 Interview with Aher, cattle keeper and farmer, Alel, 9 September 2019.

17 Interview with Anok, farmer, Alel, 30 August 2019; and interview with Peter, cattle keeper and farmer, Alel, 9 September 2019.

The monetization of land has not only created private property and a burgeoning rental market, especially in areas of high fertility farmland; it has also generated a market for wage labour. For those living in the Alel area, and in other fertile areas where lands have been monetized, there are often few other options. In these areas, and in other areas where land is still accessible for free through customary claims, with wages depressed and pressures on cash resources extremely high, old systems of collective labour have apparently ended. *Nafir*, a traditional communal labour system on household farms for self-consumption, has been replaced with *ajar*, working on farms for cash, or *nuz*, share-cropping.<sup>18</sup>

This wage labour market is vital for poorer residents. In particular, many women have struggled to access good land, or cannot cultivate the land that they do have because they lack the money to address immediate needs (for example, food) while they invest time and energy in cultivation. Agricultural work, especially in the context of increasingly unpredictable rainfalls and flooding,<sup>19</sup> can be a risky investment. With rising inflation and local food prices, farming is too insecure for many families. This is particularly the case for those families whose men are migrant or military workers, deployed elsewhere in South Sudan, and who therefore lack the physical resources for the work. Women with children cannot always take on the risks and costs of investing in their own farms, versus the more guaranteed immediate and regular cash of wage labour. For example, Julia, who was recently widowed with several young children, explains how she could not cope with balancing the time demands and risks of self-sufficient food production on her own farm: 'I was the one looking for food and cultivating at the same time, and could not make it.'<sup>20</sup>

The system of wage labour now also includes cattle herding.<sup>21</sup> Before conflict began in 1983, cattle herds were managed and cared for by young men and women within *gol* units (extended family cattle camps), bringing together the cattle of several families in camps that were also centres for education and the transition to adult skills and independence for young people. Cattle camp workers traded milk and manure but their work was unwaged. After the 2005 peace agreement, men and families that had been able to profit from the conflict—those who found employment in the humanitarian

18 Interview with Ngor, farmer, Akuem, 4 September 2019; interview with Angelina, farmer, Alel, 30 August 2019; and interview with local customary leader, Akuem, 4 September 2019.

19 This is reported by farmers and farmworkers across RVI research from 2017 to 2019. Also see: Nyathon James Hoth Mai, Nhial Tiitmamer and Augustino Ting Mayai, 'Climate Change and Conflicts in South Sudan', Juba: The Sudd Institute, May 2018. Accessed 1 October 2020, <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/climate-change-and-conflicts-south-sudan/>; Nhial Tiitmamer, 'South Sudan's Devastating Floods: Why They Happen and Why They Need a Coherent National Policy', Juba: The Sudd Institute, 15 November 2019. Accessed 17 September 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudans-devastating-floods-why-they-happen-and-why-they-need-coherent>.

20 Interview with Julia, groundnut trader, Maper market, 10 September 2019.

21 Also see Hannah Wild, Jok Madut Jok, and Ronak Patel, 'The Militarization of Cattle Raiding in South Sudan: How a Traditional Practice Became a Tool for Political Violence', *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 3/1 (March 2018): 2.

industries (paid in USD), lucrative commands within the SPLA and SPLM/A administrations, or in industry and business in northern Sudan—began to invest their cash in large privately owned cattle herds.<sup>22</sup> These owners, who are often based in Aweil town or outside the region, and whose children are generally pursuing higher education or employment elsewhere, rely on a cash-dependent labour force to manage their herds.<sup>23</sup> This is, however, a relatively new system of wage labour that has created a market for exploitation. With options in the borderland limited, farm owners have a captive and dependent labour pool.

## Growing inequalities and new forms of exploitation

Wealthier residents with significant legal, social and economic power, as well as often political and military connections, have used (and encouraged) these changes. Their access to cash, and (frequently) their positions in local and national military, business and political systems, means that these upper classes are much more able to capture this cheap land and labour, and to maintain and entrench this system for their own benefit.

For example, a local UN employee in Aweil town, the wife of the former SPLA chief of staff, a state MP and other local businesspeople are all heavily invested in agriculture in Alel, employing up to several hundred workers at a time. The SSPDF (South Sudan People’s Defence Forces) ground force commander owns large farms in his home village of Udhum and in Warlang, a fertile area far north of Aweil. Three businesspeople from Wanyjok own large farms, each of whom employ dozens of men during cultivation season. Their financial power gives them access to lorries, tractors and warehouse facilities in Aweil.<sup>24</sup>

The rise in wage labour, however, along with increasing insecurity (due to land alienation, markets and currency shifts, and daily low pay), means that most poorer residents are increasingly trapped into dependence on these wealthy landowners. Poor workers rely on extremely short-term or day-to-day loans and costs. For a small tea and coffee business, renting chairs, tea making equipment, borrowing charcoal, and renting market

22 Interview with William, cattle keeper, Alel, 27 August 2019; interview with Aher, cattle keeper and farmer, Alel, 9 September 2019; and interview with Peter, cattle keeper and farmer, Alel, 9 September 2019.

23 The work is generally done by children of distant relatives because of high rates of theft. This is, however, different from the *gol* system (extended family cattle camps, arranged by clan), which still exist. Young men increasingly demand cash for this work, either through rights to sell the milk from a specific number of cattle in the camp (a wage method borrowed from Darfur) or direct payment of around SSP 3,000–6,000 (USD 10–20) per month, generally on top of free food and milk. Most of these young men invest this money in their own education or in business start-ups, and sometimes in their own cattle, as a means of raising funds for a few seasons.

24 Some of the relatives of these individuals benefit second hand from this private agricultural business; e.g. by acting as stewards or overseers, or borrowing tractors or funds to pay farmworkers. Interview with Peter, trader, Udhum market, 7 September 2019.

space all come with high interest rates—from 10–30 per cent on a month term—even when loans are made by church groups or other market workers.

Agricultural and market work is deeply insecure. It is subject to changing food and other retail prices, to climactic shifts, rains and flooding, and small-scale disasters such as fire, crop diseases, pests, health crises, snakebites and long-term illness.<sup>25</sup> It also fuels forms of dependence and vulnerability, including the availability of and falling real-term wages for agricultural work, and the ability and commitment of farmers to pay wages at the end of a week or season. Moreover, it is hard to hold powerful employers to account, other than through expensive court cases—an untenable solution for people who are already impoverished.

As such, most people in this region are dependent on daily and seasonal work that is subject to many short-term debts and loans, contingencies such as health and climate, and unequal power relations that come with the possibility of abuse. This dependency and insecurity shortens people’s time horizons, limiting men and women’s abilities to make long-term plans and investments, and focusing their energies on short-term and immediately stressful financial calculations and contingencies.<sup>26</sup> It is also personally and mentally overwhelming. Those living in this economy emphasize the risks of suicide, and often confess to depression and heavy drinking.<sup>27</sup> Samson, a South Sudanese migrant worker and teacher in Sudan, says, ‘This is not a future. I am supposed to have social insurance, for me and my family, and do something for Sudan, I cannot be cornered in one place.’<sup>28</sup>

Local analysis of this system often produces a strong critique of the middle and upper classes, which benefit from their monopoly on political-economic power, exploiting rather than investing in the country. For example, Luciano (another South Sudanese migrant worker and student in Khartoum) explains, ‘You can see now in Sudan the division of people into classes is taking place. Soon there will be no middle class, just upper and lower-class citizens only.’<sup>29</sup> These economic and political changes are a well-known and apparently intractable shift. Akuin, an unemployed student still in South Sudan, states, ‘The worst thing now is, if you are poor and unemployed, it’s sure that you will always stay poor and will never find a job, and your children will stay without jobs.’<sup>30</sup>

25 Interview with Nyibol, groundnut trader, Nyalath, 3 September 2019.

26 This waged labour market, and its dependencies and insecurities, is reflected in local conversations over stress, shame and dignity (*dheeng*). See: Joseph Diing Majok, ‘War, Migration and Work: Changing social relations in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderlands’, London: Rift Valley Institute, 2019.

27 Interview with William, unemployed mechanic and driver, Malek Alel, 6 September 2019; interview with Manut, national security worker, Juba, 1 October 2019; interview with Simon, police officer, Maper, 29 August 2019; and interview with local customary leader, Maper market, 3 September 2019.

28 Interview with Samson, migrant worker and teacher from Raga, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

29 Interview with Luciano, migrant worker and student, Khartoum, 25 September 2019; and interview with Bol, market worker, Akuem, 4 September 2019.

30 Interview with Akuin, unemployed student, Malek Alel, 6 September 2019.

This borderland political economy therefore had two main effects. First, it traps the workers who cannot afford to escape the daily stress and insecurity, in particular those with dependent elderly family and children whose everyday upkeep is expensive and whom they cannot leave. These trapped people are a useful pool of cheap labour for wealthier residents. Second, it creates a pool of desperate young people, who want better lives but are trapped in South Sudan. This is the foundation for military and migrant labour pathways across the region.

## Migration and gender

Many young men have headed north (see below) for work or have moved to towns for cash labour in restaurants, driving motorcycle taxis, doing market work or long-distance trade between villages and the border. Many have also gone into military work and either have been deployed away from home or died in conflicts between 2013 and 2018.<sup>31</sup>

These options are generally not available to young women. Unmarried young women who have taken up independent market trading, for instance, are stigmatized as being cursed or working as prostitutes. Women often voice deep frustrations about this. For example, Anok, a farmer in Alel, says, 'I want to live a better life than this life I am living today. ... [I want to] have a good life and study and get a good job'.<sup>32</sup> For many young women, marriage is a way of gaining some potential paths to independence. For those whose parents cannot afford to send them to school, getting married potentially can lead to education and personal betterment. Ayak, a midwife and student nurse in Maper, explains that it is preferable to 'wasting your time with no school fees and so on'.<sup>33</sup> Casual sexual relationships for cash are also a common move. As Adhel, a twenty-year-old female teacher and preacher from Aweil now living in a remote squatter settlement in Khartoum, explains: 'It's temptation, easy money, and you can say—let me take a short-cut [to some money and freedom] and go with them. Why not?'<sup>34</sup> Both marriage and casual sex for cash are, however, risky options. On the one hand, marriage can trap women into the financial stress of having large families with men with limited resources. On the other, casual sex for cash can result in pregnancy and might jeopardize future marriage arrangements.

31 See: Alan Boswell, 'Insecure Power and Violence: The Rise and Fall of Paul Malong and the Mathiang Anyoor', Geneva: Small Arms Survey, October 2019. Accessed 21 October 2019, <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/briefing-papers/HSBA-BP-Mathiang-Anyoor.pdf>; Nicki Kindersley, 'Armed Work and State Reconstruction in South Sudan: Beyond the Peace Deal', Note Analyse 10, Observatoire Afrique de l'Est: Enjeux Politiques & Sécuritaires, Khartoum: Centre d'études et de documentation économiques, juridiques et sociales au Soudan (CEDEJ), 2019.

32 Interview with Anok, tenant farmer, Alel, 30 August 2019.

33 Interview with Ayak, Maper suburb, 29 August 2019.

34 Interview with Adhel, Khartoum, 28 September 2019.



## 4. Escaping the borderland

For young men and women in this borderland economy in South Sudan, there are three immediate options in terms of looking for better paid work and opportunities: Attempting to access local education; seeking migrant work in Juba or other regional towns such as Wau, or across the border in Sudan; or hunting for military or security work, either locally or in Juba. One key driver of out-migration by young people from rural communities in South Sudan is the search for education. Young migrant workers generally look both to support their siblings and fund their own educational ambitions. Unless they take up military or security work (which is only available to young men), however, employment options are limited.

### Moving for education

A central, often overlooked, motivation for these young men and women is their common aspiration for education. This includes formal class-based learning, as well as opportunities to learn creative and practical skills, such as music production, photography and computer technology. Formal education options in the Aweil borderland are, however, now very limited. With the economic crisis beginning in 2013, and food prices and inflation outstripping wages, state schoolteachers struggled to survive on their salaries. Many teachers left their positions, using their qualifications and English language skills to find jobs in military employment, aid work, or across the border in Darfur and Khartoum in Sudan. This led to the collapse of many rural government schools, concentrating the remaining ones in major towns and in Aweil. This has precipitated the migration of many young men and women into towns, often to seek private schools, which continued to pay their teachers in line with inflation.<sup>35</sup>

Many young people aspire, through learning, to acquire safe office jobs with secure salaries but this does not necessarily mean lazy sinecures: Young men and women on the borderland want to be lawyers, civil engineers and political reformers.<sup>36</sup> Many young men and women also aspire to fund the education of others, discussing opening local low fee schools in their home villages.<sup>37</sup> This is because education might save other young people: 'They will not be recruited into the army and die easily. They will not drop out of school and marry easily. And they will not continue to migrate desperately to be mistreated in other places.'<sup>38</sup> Young people in the borderland understand how the control of educational opportunity is a tool of the wealthy and powerful:

35 Interview with Dominic, youth leader, Udhum market, 9 September 2019.

36 Interview with James, ex-soldier and student in Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 2 October 2019.

37 Interview with Garang, migrant teacher, Haj Yousif, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

38 Interview with local customary leader, Akuem, 4 September 2019.

That is why they are sending their children abroad [for education]. The money for sending children abroad could bring us teachers or we could use it for training the teachers we have. If we do that, the son of a farmer can have education. And the son of a doctor or an engineer can also be educated in South Sudan, so that we can all have an equal community. *Ya zol* [hey you], they [those elites] said, am I *Mutamar Watani* [a member of the ruling National Congress Party] or what? They said that this country was not acquired through writing. We got it through shooting. Let it continue like that, with shooting, until further notice. A very strange world.<sup>39</sup>

Seeking education in local towns or further afield requires extensive planning and practical support. This is needed to find somewhere to stay and to learn about employment opportunities and comparative school fees and tuition quality. The funds required rule out many young women, unless their families are wealthy and they have relatives in town to care for them. Wol, a young man at secondary school in Aweil town, spent a lot of time building a good relationship with his wealthy uncle in order to eventually ask him for permission to stay with him in Aweil to study.<sup>40</sup> Dut, another migrant secondary school student in Aweil town, saved up funds during agricultural seasons, collecting SSP 1,500–2,000 (USD 5.00–6.60) each year by saving it with a local shopkeeper, and paid for his own schooling.<sup>41</sup> Now, however, he is struggling with the private school fees for his secondary education—SSP 7,500 in 2018, SSP 14,000 in 2019 and now SSP 20,000 in 2020 (USD 25, 47 and 67 at the time of interview, respectively), nearly triple the amount over this brief period. He was forced to take a year off before secondary school to save money, and moved to the Kiir Adem border post with Sudan, finding work doing long-distance transport for businesspeople between Kiir, Gok Machar, Pamat, Abyei and Marol. Since beginning secondary school in 2018, he works around his studies in Aweil, renting a motorbike to use as a taxi, paying SSP 1,000 (USD 3.30) per day. A boda driver on an old bike earns about SSP 1,000 per day, and a driver on a new bike about SSP 2000 per day.<sup>42</sup>

Other young men sell water in markets and at latrines for about SSP 550 (USD 1.80) per day, using rented wheelbarrows to transport the water. Filling six jerrycans at the water point costs a total SSP 50 (USD 0.16), with each can selling for SSP 40 (USD 0.13).<sup>43</sup> Partly because of the inflated rental market, there is a premium on buying a wheelbarrow, which are all imported and can cost around SSP 30,000 (USD 100) on the border. Others take part-time jobs at construction sites at the weekend or sell sweets on the road after

39 Interview with Abdalla, migrant teacher in Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

40 Interview with Wol, student and part-time market worker, Ayuang market, Aweil, 10 September 2019.

41 Interview with Dut, student and part-time market worker, Ayuang market, Aweil, 10 September 2019. The information in the remainder of this paragraph derives from this source.

42 This income difference is due to people preferring to ride on newer and therefore generally safer and more comfortable bikes.

43 Interview with Jok, student and part-time market worker, Maper, 29 August 2019.

school. Most young people (men and women) are extremely pragmatic about what amounts to an unpredictable long-term investment:

You cannot spend all your life studying, because we are Africans. If we were like white people or other nations whose lives are stable, you can study your whole life without any problem. But, for us you must study a little bit, and work for your life a little bit, so that things can go well.<sup>44</sup>

## Migration to Juba

Juba, the capital of South Sudan, is situated in Central Equatoria state. It is about a two-day journey by truck from Aweil, and is the next option for young men and women looking for education and work. Migration to Juba has slowed down, however, since the economic crisis and conflict in 2013. While travelling to Juba by truck or bus is relatively straightforward if you can raise the money, when migrants arrive there from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, they often find that 'living is hard and accommodation rare'.<sup>45</sup> As Acien, now a second-hand phone seller in Juba, explains: 'It is only having a close friend or relative that would allow you to stay with in Juba nowadays.'<sup>46</sup>

Resettling in Juba requires significant assistance from friends and relatives, both for the costs of transport to Juba and for life in the city.<sup>47</sup> Young men with limited social networks walk the city on a daily basis to hunt for construction work. Friendship groups gift each other start-up capital, as with Malong, whose friend gave him SSP 30,000 (USD 100) to start his second-hand phone selling business. Until he started working independently, Malong shadowed other hawkers, learning what phones turned profits.<sup>48</sup> Other young men hawk sandals and clothes in residential areas, work as bus conductors or *boda* (motorcycle taxi) drivers. Men with more investment capital travel between Juba and Uganda importing market goods. Formal employment in NGOs or government work is the preserve of those with powerful backers:

Young men here do not get [contracted and waged office] jobs. Jobs are offered to those who are related to those in offices, which are called 'uncle jobs'. Unless you have somebody powerful behind you, you cannot get a job. Maybe your friend or uncle is a big guy, or something like that, who can stand behind you.<sup>49</sup>

44 Interview with Luciano, graduate and migrant worker, Khartoum, 25 September 2019.

45 Interview with Santino, migrant worker, university student and semi-professional footballer, Juba, 2 October 2019.

46 Interview with Acien, second-hand mobile phone market trader, Juba, 27 September 2019; and interview with Santino, migrant worker, university student and semi-professional footballer, Juba, 2 October 2019.

47 Interview with Manut, national security worker, Juba, 1 October 2019; and interview with Deng, student representative, Juba, 25 September 2019.

48 Interview with Malong, mobile phone market trader, Juba, 27 September 2019.

49 Interview with Santino, migrant worker, university student and semi-professional footballer, Juba, 2 October 2019.

The pressures of survival in Juba, and the costs of living there, limit the ability of young migrants to invest in education. Instead, many young men opt for military, private security or police work (the police also is a route for women) to find more financial stability and regular hours, and to fund their education.<sup>50</sup>

## **Armed work for young men and women**

Armed work in the military and security sector has become the dominant form of waged labour in South Sudan. It has become the main opportunity for young men (and some women, for whom police work is an option) to finance their studies and look after the needs of their families. It is also a major driver of internal mobility in South Sudan for young men and women. Soldiers, private security and national security workers are frequently deployed across South Sudan, with wives and young families often following. Other young men and women travel to Juba to hunt for better education and work prospects, including better military or police recruitment possibilities in the capital. In comparison, recruitment into the military in Aweil is generally unprofitable: Salaries are irregular or unpaid, and the working conditions in remote and border post barracks are poor and dangerous. In contrast, getting recruited into military or security work in Juba offers more chances for paid positions in safer administrative or policing roles, or secondment to bodyguard duties for important people. Even being closer to payroll offices and army bureaucracy is useful for trying to claim unpaid wages and petition for better postings.

Military and security recruitment, in Juba and elsewhere, also carries significant risks for poor young men and women. Since renewed conflict and economic collapse in 2016, it is an increasingly undesirable route to professional development. As John, a security sector worker in Juba, emphasizes: ‘The biggest challenge facing young people here is their recruitment into the army.’<sup>51</sup>

Only middle and upper-class families are generally able to access better entry positions, through a combination of bribes and family connections.<sup>52</sup> Wealthier people, including military and government workers themselves, prefer that their children do not take up (risky) armed work, unless they have a job offer in logistics or finance,<sup>53</sup> or in town-based national security services where there are opportunities for further study and services. Police work also offers some safer opportunities, particularly if a young person manages to get assigned to customs and immigration departments. Young workers call these ‘wet bits’ of work (as opposed to ‘dry bits’ of work, which have few opportunities to earn

50 Interview with Deng, student representative, Juba, 25 September 2019.

51 Interview with John, market worker, Malek Alel, 6 September 2019.

52 Interview with Manut, national security worker, Juba, 1 October 2019.

53 Interview with Thiel, security guard, Ayuang market, Aweil, 2 September 2019.

any profit).<sup>54</sup> Generally, a young person now needs personal recommendations to get a police and national security job.<sup>55</sup>

Frontline army work is therefore ‘left to poor men’s sons, who have no other option to survive’.<sup>56</sup> As Garang, a chief in Warlang, explains: ‘When you are poor and desperate, you will go to where you would find money. A big proportion of young men—equivalent to those who migrate to the north—went to the military, and they did that to get money.’<sup>57</sup> As Thiel, a security guard in Aweil town, indicates: ‘The military is the only source of employment that the government has opened to young men.’<sup>58</sup> Even if the salaries for recruits are irregular and low—SSP 500–1,600 (USD 1.70–5.30), that money might solve some problems.<sup>59</sup> When salaries arrive, most men use their earnings to pay off loans.<sup>60</sup>

For most poor men, the military is a chance for a ‘better life than doing nothing.’<sup>61</sup> Soldiers deployed outside Juba at Garam, for example, can make charcoal after their duty shifts and organize its transport to Juba for sale.<sup>62</sup> Armed work also offers some macho freedoms, as one soldier explains: ‘Because I cannot be threatened by anyone. But if I were a civilian, I could be threatened by the police, by whoever.’<sup>63</sup>

Young women are also increasingly seeking national security and police jobs: Some young women joined and trained in the *Mathiang Anyoor* (the brown caterpillar), the militia recruited by then governor Paul Malong, who drew members from among under-employed young people across the former Northern Bahr el-Ghazal State. Abuk watched her young neighbour leave for training:

She asked her father, who is a soldier, to give her money to pay for school but her father told her that he does not have the money. She got angry and told her

54 Interview with Simon, police officer, Maper, 29 August 2019.

55 Interview with Manut, national security worker, Juba, 1 October 2019.

56 Interview with Thiel, security guard, Ayuang market, Aweil, 2 September 2019.

57 Interview with local customary leader, Akuem, 4 September 2019.

58 Interview with Thiel, security guard, Ayuang market, Aweil, 2 September 2019.

59 Interview with Malong, mobile phone market trader, Juba, 27 September 2019; and interview with Arol, soldier, Juba, 25 September 2019.

60 Interview with Simon, police officer, Maper, 29 August 2019.

61 Interview with Ateny, market trader, Juba, 27 September 2019.

62 Interview with Ateny, market trader, Juba, 27 September 2019.

63 Interview with Makuac, soldier and military administrator, Maper, 28 August 2019.

father, 'I am now going to Pantit, to join the training with *Mathiang Anyoor*', and she packed her clothes and left for Pantit.<sup>64</sup>

Low-paid military work is the last resort and a dead end for most young men and women in South Sudan. Thiel, in his late teens, explains how he 'struggled and failed to find any work, except military work. I was trained in Luri as operational police in Juba before 15 December 2013, and I graduated in 2014.'<sup>65</sup> After fighting in Equatoria, he goes on to say: 'They still did not put me in school [despite promises], and I also could not feed my family, so I decided to return to Aweil and live with my family.'

Other soldiers were deployed a long way from their families, with very little pay, limited phone signals and no access to education. Many deserted.<sup>66</sup> Thiel now works with a local private security firm, and says that desertion is common: 'I lied to them. I told them that the school needs me to teach. ... There are those who decided to leave without permission, which we call "*ezin chol-ayyak*" [a dark grass permission]. You leave your gun and escape through the dark grass.'<sup>67</sup>

Military recruitment and poorly paid private security work traps young internal migrants in a cheap armed labour pool. Their other options are embarrassing, socially undignified and similarly dead-end manual labour in towns in South Sudan. These increasingly limited options inside the borders of South Sudan mean that many young men and women on this borderland look north for other opportunities. For many, long-distance migration, and even other types of military work in Sudan or further afield, are more viable and sometimes more remunerative than the stark and restrictive possibilities that are immediately available in South Sudan.

## Moving across the northern border

As the young migrant worker Madut succinctly sums up the borderland political economy, 'This situation chases people.'<sup>68</sup> There are very few options for young people in the borderland if they cannot build sustainable lives in an impoverished rural economy or in the internal militarized migrant labour market in South Sudan. The other option is

64 The Pantit military training site was temporarily closed down when Paul Malong was deposed as chief of general staff and exiled by President Salva Kiir Mayardit. In 2019, under the R-ARCSS (Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan), Pantit was identified as one of the cantonment areas. This facilitated its reopening to train (and further recruit to) the SPLA-IO (Sudan People's Liberation Army-in Opposition) affiliated SSPA (South Sudan Patriotic Army) rebel forces under Hussein Abdel Bagi Ayii, based across the border in Meiram town in southern Kordofan. This gives young people in Aweil another opportunity to join armed work. Interview with Abuk, groundnut trader, Nyalath, 3 September 2019.

65 Interview with Thiel, security guard, Ayuang market, Aweil, 2 September 2019. The sentence that follows is also from this source.

66 Interview with Malong, mobile phone market trader, Juba, 27 September 2019.

67 Interview with Thiel, security guard, Ayuang market, Aweil, 2 September 2019.

68 Interview with Manut, national security worker, Juba, 1 October 2019.

moving north: To town and agricultural areas in Darfur and Kordofan, toward Khartoum and onward.

The decision to leave South Sudan on long-distance migrant paths can only be understood within the context of this militarized borderland economy. Leaving South Sudan is often a desperate decision, based on a lack of options, not wanting to be part of the local borderland regime, or wasting life scratching out a hard physically destructive living in either rural or urban work. Permanent resettlement is understood as a path for people who have ‘lost hope of success in their lives’ in South Sudan.<sup>69</sup> This is partly because of a real lack of options in South Sudan, as William explains: ‘I don’t want to stay here anymore. I will think about what to do. I am a builder, a driver and a mechanic and I will make a decision about what to do and where to go. But in reality, South Sudan has turned people down [disappointed them] and I am sorry.’<sup>70</sup>

The majority of young men and women moving north are weathering agricultural disasters or financial troubles by moving to southern Darfur refugee camps such as Kerior or searching for paid work. They mostly do not intend to stay forever. Instead, people are merely seeking a year or a few years of work to build investment capital and skills to bring back home, or to send funds home so family can ride out the disasters, such as flooding or insect infestation, that inevitably occur.<sup>71</sup> These journeys are often supported by family. Garang’s mother, for example, sold a cow for SSP 1,500 (then USD 395, at an approximate exchange rate of SSP 3.8 to USD 1) in November 2011 so that he could head north across the border to Sudan.<sup>72</sup>

Many people return to their former neighbourhoods, old friends, relatives and former bosses in Sudan, building on experience and connections made during wartime displacements in the 1990s and 2000s (before South Sudanese independence and the resulting international border). Most young men work as manual labourers, septic tank cleaners, agricultural or restaurant workers, or in *kamin* (brick making) across the Sudan, which

69 Interview with Haw, migrant teacher, Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 28 September 2019.

70 Interview with William, unemployed mechanic and driver, Malek Alel, 6 September 2019.

71 Interview with Bol, market worker, Akuem, 4 September 2019. This form of seasonal migrant labour in north Sudan has been relatively normal since the 1950s. For example, see: El-Wathig Kameir, ‘The Political Economy of Labour Migration in the Sudan: A Comparative Case Study of Migrant Workers in an Urban Situation’, Hamburg: Institut für Afrika-Kunde, 1988; Babiker Abdalla Abdelrahman, ‘Internal Migration in the Sudan: A Study of the Socio-Economic Characteristics of Migrants in Khartoum’, PhD dissertation, University of Glasgow, 1979. Accessed 29 September 2014, [http://encore.lib.gla.ac.uk/iii/encore/record/C\\_\\_Rb1628982](http://encore.lib.gla.ac.uk/iii/encore/record/C__Rb1628982); Mohamed El-Awad Galal-al-Din, ‘The Nature and Causes of Labour Migration to the Khartoum Conurbation’, in *Urbanization and urban life in the Sudan*, ed. Valdo Pons, Hull: University of Hull, 1980; Yath Awan Yath, ‘Dinka Migrants in Khartoum: Coping Strategies in the Face of Economic and Political Hardships: The Example of the Suq El Markazi Squatter Settlement, Sudan’, in *Coping with Vulnerability and Criticality: Case Studies on Food-Insecure People and Places*, eds. H-G Bohle, T E Downing, J O Field and F N Ibrahim, Saarbrücken and Ft Lauderdale: Breitenbach Verlag, 1993.

72 Interview with Garang, migrant teacher, Haj Yousif, Khartoum, 24 September 2019. The exchange rate is approximate and based on Nicki Kindersley’s notes from research in 2011.

is still described by some as ‘the north’.<sup>73</sup> This is not only because the pay is fractionally better—the costs of travel, finding work, rent, and the risk of theft and abuse all serve to minimize returns—but also because of the social embarrassment of doing this undignified and dirty work at home, particularly with the rise of smartphones and social media, which may be used to document these activities. This problem is summarized in the saying ‘*raan acie dheng wuot karou*’ (a man [or woman] cannot hold his dignity in two different places).<sup>74</sup>

At present, fewer women head northward, at least on their own. The number of women migrants peaked in 2016 and 2017 during the food crisis, when market prices were too high: Women sold their bedding and used that cash to travel.<sup>75</sup> The women who move now are heading to join their husbands in Sudan (or at least claim that this is their reason).<sup>76</sup> It is particularly difficult for women to move on their own, especially if they are bringing children with them. In part, this is because the South Sudanese national army and security forces are actively detaining women and their children at border points, often beating or sexually assaulting them, with the justification that they must stay with their families and that their children are the property of South Sudan.<sup>77</sup> This traps young women and their families in South Sudan, and exerts pressure on their husbands and brothers to stay in the region, too.

Some women find official permission from chiefs and local authorities to cross into Sudan for medical care or to sell land or houses bought during previous displacements in Sudan. As Santino Angok, a young man, explains:

Women sneak across the border. For example, last year we crossed River Kiir with ten women and their kids, sneaking across the border. They succeeded and we went with them up to Khartoum. We had no alternative but to help them and we shared whatever little we had until we reached Khartoum.<sup>78</sup>

Attempts by the South Sudanese military and national security to control the flow of women and children over the border—often violently—are, to these local authorities, justified. Unlike the seasonal migration of young men into commercial farm work or peri-urban manual labour in Sudan—a longstanding seasonal dynamic since the 1950s that helps keep village economies afloat—the permanent or semi-permanent migration

73 Interview with Mel, seasonal migrant worker, Maluil Akoong, 5 September 2019.

74 Interview with Thiel, security guard, Ayuang market, Aweil, 2 September 2019; and interview with Peter, trader, Udhum market, 7 September 2019.

75 See: Food Security Cluster, ‘Republic of South Sudan: Current and Projected (January–July 2017) Acute Food Insecurity Situation’, IPC Alert, Issue 6, Rome: World Food Programme, 20 February 2017. Accessed 25 June 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/republic-south-sudan-current-and-projected-january-july-2017-acute-food>.

76 Interview with Adhel, midwife and student nurse, Maper, 29 August 2019.

77 See Kindersley and Majok, ‘Monetized Livelihoods’, 34–36.

78 Interview with Santino, migrant worker, university student and semi-professional footballer, Juba, 2 October 2019.



of women with children is seen as more damaging. They are viewed as a threat to family life in the region, challenging the stability of marriages, extended families and clan units.

## Challenges of migration to the north

There are many barriers and risks to the movement of men and women north of the border to Sudan, not least the risk of snake bites by evading military posts as a result of travelling through the forest at night<sup>79</sup> and escaping the border patrols that often target women. As a local customary leader says, 'If you don't carry enough money on the road, you cannot reach Khartoum.'<sup>80</sup> Many migrants have complicated and stressful stories about their journeys north. For example, James's relatives sold UNMISS PoC (United Nations Mission in South Sudan Protection of Civilians) food aid in Wau and sent him north to hunt for work in 2015 but he ran out of money by the time he reached Daein town, where he saved for the cost of finishing his journey to Khartoum by working *itala* (loading and offloading lorries) and *barshot* (cash-in-hand work in markets).<sup>81</sup> As with all other migrants from south of the border, James had to buy a Sudanese national certificate number (*al-rakm al-watan*) to get into Khartoum. This is particularly well-policed at Kosti, a major junction on the route to the capital, and costs a lot.<sup>82</sup> As a customary leader explains, 'Those without money remain in the farms and end up being exploited.'<sup>83</sup>

Most people with friends already in Khartoum try to get to Kosti and then contact them to help with money and connections to *al-rakm al-watan* dealers, so they can get to the city.<sup>84</sup> Without this number, Sudanese cities are extremely risky for South Sudanese migrant workers. In 2019, the regular migrant worker Santino arrived in Nuhud at night, along with nine other travellers:

I was the only one with a nationality identification certificate. The manager of every hotel we went to would accept me to stay the night, and refused the nine others. Nuhud is very insecure at night because there are gold miners who pass there with a lot of money, and the hotel managers fear for their security.<sup>85</sup>

Most people emphasize that pay and conditions in Sudan have significantly deteriorated since the South Sudan secession in 2011. This is due to the need for documentation, the expense of fees and checkpoint bribes on the road north, and worsening treatment by

79 Interview with local customary leader, Akuem, 4 September 2019.

80 Interview with local customary leader, Maper market, 3 September 2019.

81 Interview with James, ex-soldier and student, Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 2 October 2019.

82 Interview with Charles, medical student and part-time motorbike taxi worker, Maper, Aweil, 29 August 2019.

83 Interview with local customary leader, Akuem, 4 September 2019.

84 Interview with local customary leader, Maper market, 3 September 2019.

85 Interview with Santino, migrant worker, university student and semi-professional footballer, Juba, 2 October 2019.

local Sudanese residents and employers, partly due to increased impunity for abuses against undocumented migrant workers. There are stories of murders (including one in Muglad in a dispute over a smartphone), harassment on farms and in brickmaking sites near rivers, and abuse of women brewing alcohol in agricultural sites and towns.<sup>86</sup> Rates of pay have dropped, making it difficult for most workers to save more than SSP 500 (USD 1.70) per month, and depreciation in the Sudanese pound has undermined the value of remittances.<sup>87</sup>

In southern Darfur and Kordofan, there is also the risk of military recruitment. This recruitment includes very young boys between twelve and fifteen years old—too young to find enough employment in market or seasonal agricultural work because they are not yet physically strong enough. Young teenage boys are also vulnerable to recruitment drives by militias in Darfur.<sup>88</sup>

Coercive recruitment at both rebel and Sudanese militia checkpoints is commonly reported, particularly on the road to the Sudanese town of Meiram, an hour drive over the border.<sup>89</sup> South Sudanese rebel militia recruiters are active in and around Kerior refugee camp on the Sudan side of the border and the farmlands in south-eastern Darfur. Young men who might have lost their funds or the goods they had intended to trade (or were seized by militia) reportedly join armed work out of frustration, promises of potential pay and employment, or desperation.<sup>90</sup>

Men and women who manage to make it to Khartoum find a mix of similar employment, often finding work as teachers in private schools, particularly if they have some English language skills that they learnt from the South Sudan education system.<sup>91</sup> Samson is an engineering graduate, who chose to do evening classes, teaching on top of a job as a cleaner at a shopping mall: Most of his money goes on housing and he is searching for work that ‘will take me out of overload, working for eight hours in the morning and eight hours at night, which is a lot’.<sup>92</sup> Women with some education can also access teaching jobs, which are generally more secure and better paid than domestic labour.<sup>93</sup> There are, however, significant challenges for migrant workers in accessing further education themselves, mainly as the admission and tuition fees are in US dollars.<sup>94</sup>

86 Interview with Bol, market worker, seasonal migrant labourer and farmer, Maper, 29 August 2019; and interview with local customary leader, Akuem, 4 September 2019.

87 Interview with Philip, migrant worker and second-hand mobile phone trader, Gok Machar, 31 August 2019.

88 Interview with Abuk, groundnut trader, Nyalath, 3 September 2019.

89 From multiple interviews and conversations during research over August and September 2019.

90 Interview with Akuin, unemployed student, Malek Alel, 6 September 2019; and interview with Charles, medical student and part-time motorbike taxi worker, Maper, Aweil, 29 August 2019.

91 Interview with Garang, migrant teacher, Haj Yousif, Khartoum, 24 September 2019; and interview with Haw, migrant teacher, Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 28 September 2019.

92 Interview with Samson, migrant worker and teacher from Raga, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

93 Interview with Adhel, teacher and preacher from Aweil, Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 29 September 2019.

94 Interview with Garang, migrant teacher, Haj Yousif, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

Another option for men is mining work in the gold fields in Sudan and on its borders.<sup>95</sup> Deng had some friends working in a mine already and tested it out for a few months.<sup>96</sup> He emphasizes that it requires a lot of energy and a lot of appetite for risk. Some of his friends have been there for more than a year with no luck, working in group pits of 16 people on day and night shifts with metal detectors. Deng explains:

I see people go to Abu [a bus station in Khartoum] for a ticket. The ticket cost is about 500 Sudanese pounds (USD 7.50) to the gold mining areas. ... It takes you months. It takes a year, or two years, to collect something. ... You will take out a lot of loans while you are still not sure whether you are going to get gold. So this is why, for people who have only a small source of income for survival in Khartoum, they think a lot before risking their life to go there.<sup>97</sup>

Each mine owner takes a share, loaning food on payment when gold is found. Gold money is divided between the military government in the area, the businesspeople who feed the workers and the workers themselves. Santino's friends are still there. With luck, finding gold will open up new doors: 'With gold, you can be smuggled into Cairo. They can promise to take you anywhere, the dealers around there.'<sup>98</sup>

## To Egypt, Libya or Europe

Many young men and women have given up hope of building secure lives—let alone fulfilling their educational and personal ambitions—in South Sudan or Sudan. Manut explains that he talks to people 'in Khartoum and Cairo on messenger, and they have dropped out [of society] totally. They are working with their hands to survive, and they hate South Sudan.'<sup>99</sup>

Even work in Sudan does not provide stability and opportunity for poor migrant young men and women. For young migrants, stress, frustration and despair combine with their increased connectivity and knowledge about the global economic system. As one young migrant puts it, 'The world's become like an open book, as people say.'<sup>100</sup>

95 Generally, a young person needs some connections to a mining area to both get there and get work. Interview with Wol, Aweil-origin migrant worker, Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 28 September 2019. For more on gold mining in Sudan, see: Mohamed Salah and Enrico Ille, 'How Sudan's gold boom is changing labour relations in Blue Nile state', Briefing Paper, London: Rift Valley Institute, March 2020. Accessed 8 July 2020, <http://riftvalley.net/index.php/publication/how-sudans-gold-boom-changing-labour-relations-blue-nile-state>

96 Interview with Deng, migrant teacher, Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 28 September 2019. The information that follows is also derived from this source.

97 Interview with Deng, migrant teacher, Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 28 September 2019.

98 Interview with Santino, migrant worker, university student and semi-professional footballer, Juba, 2 October 2019.

99 Interview with Manut, national security worker, Juba, 1 October 2019.

100 Interview with Abdalla, migrant teacher in Jebel Aulia displaced camp, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

Because the world has become a small village. ... You can be in Sudan and while talking to your friend in the US, they can tell you that my salary is such an amount per a day. This is just in one day, while you are doing nothing in Sudan. Even in Sudan a whole day will finish without knowing what you did. ... We are wasting our time in Sudan. That is why the young men are seeking more, and taking the risk of their life to travel abroad to seek a better opportunity that will be in line with their dreams.<sup>101</sup>

Luciano, a South Sudanese border resident now based in Khartoum, explains: 'In Sudan here, there is security but life is very expensive and opportunities are not easy. Even if you get a job, the salary will not be enough, and it will not sustain you as well as your family.'<sup>102</sup> This, Samson emphasizes, 'is why young men are migrating, even if they have to die in the sea or in the desert'.<sup>103</sup>

The paths onward from Sudan are either to attempt to get to Cairo or to take the Libya road.<sup>104</sup> Akuin's friends have made it to Cairo and he is making plans: 'If November comes this year and the peace continues to stagger, I will try to raise money and go to Cairo to join my friends. All I need now is to find a way to put myself back in school.'<sup>105</sup> James is considering making the trip, and his friends in Egypt, Canada and Australia are pooling funds for him.<sup>106</sup> At least in Cairo, 'There are opportunities for a better life with dignity. There are job opportunities, and although there are some bad words you can hear [about yourself; racism], at least there is a better life there. You can save money. My colleagues are sending money to their families, even the one in Libya.'<sup>107</sup>

These risky decisions are bound up with the continued search for education and self-fulfilment on the part of young people. Luciano confirms this in saying, 'They are all chasing education.'<sup>108</sup> Khartoum and Cairo are generally too expensive for school: 'If you don't have support coming from outside, in the West, you cannot study. But if you want to just live a good life without education, then you can come.'<sup>109</sup>

The routes onward are through scholarships, the lottery of asylum applications from Cairo or the terrifying path facilitated by people smugglers and their small boats across the Mediterranean.<sup>110</sup> All of these paths depend on luck and carry different risks: UN resettlement can take years at best, and moving through Tunisia and Morocco is

101 Interview with Samson, migrant worker and teacher from Raga, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

102 Interview with Luciano, graduate and migrant worker, Khartoum, 25 September 2019.

103 Interview with Samson, migrant worker and teacher from Raga, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

104 Interview with Ateny, market trader, Juba, 27 September 2019.

105 Interview with Akuin, unemployed student, Malek Alel, 6 September 2019.

106 Interview with James, ex-soldier and student, Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 2 October 2019.

107 Interview with Samson, migrant worker and teacher from Raga, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

108 Interview with Luciano, graduate and migrant worker, Khartoum, 25 September 2019.

109 Interview with Malong, mobile phone market trader, Juba, 27 September 2019.

110 Interview with Ateny, market trader, Juba, 27 September 2019.

extremely expensive.<sup>111</sup> Samson’s friend managed to get to Germany through resettlement:

This was before the European Union thought of stopping the migration to Europe. Then people changed their plans, to go through Libya. From Libya, they cross the sea. Going through Libya—if you manage to escape the bullet, you have to face the water, and if you don’t die from the waves, you shall have to face the legal authorities there in Europe.<sup>112</sup>

Three of Manut’s friends are stuck in Cairo, trying to get out of Africa: ‘They told me that they apply [for resettlement and scholarships] but are never accepted, and they fear to travel across the ocean. They refuse to come back but are still trying to find ways to go.’<sup>113</sup>

The risks of the boat crossing are so immense that Luciano calls this ‘committing suicide’.<sup>114</sup> There are stories of people smugglers taking money and then sinking ships on purpose, and stealing people’s valuables (tied to wrists and ankles ready for the voyage) from their dead bodies.<sup>115</sup>

I heard it said that before getting on the *sumbuk* [the colloquial term for the boats that take people across the Mediterranean], people take drugs, drink beer so that they don’t feel conscious. Either you reach Europe or you die trying. And as you can see, also in Libya, how immigrants use to be mistreated, and we have all witnessed that. There are videos.<sup>116</sup>

Migrant young people have relatively clear ideas about the risks involved, including if they make it to Europe: arrest, ‘something like a prison’, ‘it is not as people think’.<sup>117</sup> Nonetheless: There are a few who succeeded. There was a boy who was here and he left months ago. He took the Libya road a few weeks ago and they travelled 18 days over the ocean and he is now in Italy. ... He talks to us on Facebook and he appreciates life there. It’s much better.<sup>118</sup>

The choices that some young people make to travel onwards to Egypt, Libya or Europe is informed by a wealth of accumulated experience and information. These decisions are also framed by their analyses of the exploitative economies of their homelands and the transit points—the temporary jobs and exploitative local economies—that they expe-

111 Interview with John, welder and builder, Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 29 September 2019.

112 Interview with Samson, migrant worker and teacher from Raga, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

113 Interview with Manut, national security worker, Juba, 1 October 2019.

114 Interview with Luciano, graduate and migrant worker, Khartoum, 25 September 2019.

115 Interview with Luciano, graduate and migrant worker, Khartoum, 25 September 2019; interview with Samson, migrant worker and teacher from Raga, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

116 Interview with Luciano, graduate and migrant worker, Khartoum, 25 September 2019.

117 Interview with Haw, migrant teacher, Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 28 September 2019.

118 Interview with Malong, mobile phone market trader, Juba, 27 September 2019.

rience on their journey north. Their knowledge of these options, and the political and economic systems they are trapped in across these multiple borders, drive their decisions, their mental health crises and appetite for risk.

## 5. Survival and mutual support across borders

Young people rely on the mutual support of their own communities to stay alive and navigate these rural, urban and long-distance cross-border pathways, despite the realities that economic crisis and changing working lives place significant strains on this support.<sup>119</sup> In South Sudan and across into Sudan and further afield, through these migrant networks, young people work hard to manage and mitigate these risks and insecurities. They do this through a combination of mutual investment, kinship, friendships and trust building, and through extensive information sharing across borders and long distances, as well as over time.

### Mutual financial support and investment

Young men and women use various ways to pool, loan and share their limited financial resources. For example, these methods include: No-interest loans between friends;<sup>120</sup> running football tournaments and pooling contributions for a prize fund;<sup>121</sup> and using remittances from friends and relatives in South Sudan and abroad, which are mainly focused on education funds for children at home.<sup>122</sup> People also organize saving boxes at home and participate in *sanduks* (rotating savings schemes), a long-standing method of collectively saving a small amount each week, with the combined total given to one member of the group on a rotating weekly basis.<sup>123</sup> This includes market traders, who may be called upon by the union chairperson to contribute donations for a trader who has been robbed or suffered a fire. Peter's market worker collective savings fund gives loans with interest to members ('a member can borrow SSP 10,000 and pay back SSP 11,500 after one year'(USD 33.30 and USD 38.30, respectively).<sup>124</sup> Some loans are in the form of indenture: 'There are people who come and say, if you give me this amount of money, I will not be able to find money to pay it back but when the rainy season comes, I will work its equivalent on your farm.'<sup>125</sup>

119 See also Thomas Yeboah, 'Navigating Precarious Employment: Social Networks Among Migrant Youth in Ghana', Institute of Development Studies Bulletin 48/3, 22 May 2017. Accessed 30 September 2020, (<https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/12983>); A. Humprey, V. Krishnan, and R. Krystalli, 'The Currency of Connections: Why Local Support Systems Are Integral to Helping People Recover in South Sudan', Mercy Corps, 2019.

120 Interview with Mel, seasonal migrant worker, Maluil Akoong, 5 September 2019.

121 Interview with Buk, volunteer teacher, Udhum, 7 September 2019.

122 Interview with local customary leader, Akuem, 4 September 2019.

123 Interview with John, restaurant worker, Aweil, 5 September 2019.

124 Interview with Peter, trader, Udhum market, 7 September 2019.

125 Interview with Peter, cattle keeper and farmer, Alel, 9 September 2019.

In Juba, housing is a sharing market, including groups of young men renting compounds together. Young men and women also invest in one another's businesses or provide start-up capital.<sup>126</sup> Friendship groups—built on school classes and market work, as well as on ethno-local origins and family ties—organize medical costs and tuition fees. Since the banning of political (and therefore pan-ethnic) unions on Juba university campuses, region specific student associations solicit donations from important people who are also from those regions. For example, the Aweil student union at the University of Juba benefits from donations from Dr Dhieu Mathok, General Lual Akol and other lawyers and business people from the Aweil area, and uses this money for tuition fees for poorer members.<sup>127</sup>

Heading north across the border to Sudan, migrant workers walk together and share phones to communicate with contacts in cities on the way, to send money and give advice.<sup>128</sup> They pay this back when they make it to Khartoum or pass the money on to other migrants.<sup>129</sup> As in Juba, friends support one another with medical, transport, school fees and food expenses.<sup>130</sup> John, a welder and builder, explains, 'We have to see that all the young men in our residential area go to school.'<sup>131</sup> This includes sharing job opportunities and accommodation.<sup>132</sup> Most mutual support is done through fellow workers and students, beyond family and clan lines, as Adhel emphasizes:

For us at the outskirts of Khartoum, we see ourselves connected to one another. Because we normally suffer from distant workplaces and a lack of transport. That is why we see ourselves as one *kutla* [piece of cloth, used colloquially to describe a close knit community]. ... People started to eat in groups. They bring whatever they have in one place in order to make a complete meal out of it.<sup>133</sup>

When people can, they send money home to South Sudan, roughly at a 1:5 exchange rate from the Sudanese to South Sudanese pound.<sup>134</sup> Across both Sudan and South Sudan, people rely on locally organized money transfer agencies that operate on trust,

126 Interview with Deng, student representative, Juba, 25 September 2019.

127 Interview with Deng, student representative, Juba, 25 September 2019, although Wol notes that this money gets 'eaten' by the union team: interview with Wol, student and part-time market worker, Ayuang market, Aweil, 10 September 2019.

128 Interview with Santino, migrant worker, university student and semi-professional footballer, Juba, 2 October 2019.

129 Interview with Charles, medical student and part-time motorbike taxi worker, Maper, Aweil, 29 August 2019.

130 Interview with John, welder and builder, Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 29 September 2019; and interview with Luciano, graduate and migrant worker, Khartoum, 25 September 2019.

131 Interview with Garang, migrant teacher, Haj Yousif, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

132 Interview with Samson, migrant worker and teacher from Raga, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

133 Interview with Adhel, teacher and preacher from Aweil, Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 29 September 2019.

134 Interview with Garang, migrant teacher, Haj Yousif, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.



or through trusted friends, traders or business owners.<sup>135</sup> In Gok Machar, for example, a local trader, Gurma, coordinates money transfers with his son in southern Darfur: His son receives money from rural migrant workers by telephone credit and he takes a 5 per cent cut before sending the money in cash to his father in Gok Machar, who takes a 10 per cent cut and then delivers the South Sudanese pounds in person to the intended recipient.<sup>136</sup>

Those working in gold mines call their friends in Khartoum to ask them to send money to their families, with the money to be paid back when the worker returns from the gold mine to Khartoum.<sup>137</sup> This helps people avoid travelling with cash. Santino exemplifies another approach to money transfers (and not travelling with cash): He uses his earnings in Khartoum to buy clothes and sandals, which he then brings by road back home to Gok Machar to sell. Once he sells his wares, he leaves the money with his cousin and travels back to Khartoum. Once back in Khartoum, Santino finds someone who wants to send money to Gok Machar, takes the money from that person and then asks his cousin to give the equivalent to the family of the person.

## Changing social norms

The long-term economic crisis in South Sudan has put increasing strain and limits on the generosity and capacity of people to invest in one another.<sup>138</sup> Guilt and frustration over unfulfilled promises from friends and relatives in the diaspora circulate.<sup>139</sup> Under significant pressure from their families and their own sense of masculinity, many young men go missing, either heading north to Sudan alone or becoming uncontactable (or change their phone numbers) during military service elsewhere in South Sudan.<sup>140</sup> There is a general feeling that: ‘Lives have changed. Recently, before the crisis, if you go to your relative and ask for help, he [or she] would do so but now he will say I have nothing and I am doing nothing. And a few relatives with jobs would say, I am struggling with my own

135 Interview with Luciano, graduate and migrant worker, Khartoum, 25 September 2019; interview with Samson, migrant worker and teacher from Raga, Khartoum, 24 September 2019; and interview with Julia, groundnut trader, Maper market, 10 September 2019.

136 Interview with Santino, migrant worker, university student and semi-professional footballer, Juba, 2 October 2019.

137 Interview with Santino, migrant worker and gold miner, Gok Machar, 31 August 2019. The information that follows is also derived from this source.

138 Interview with James, ex-soldier and student, Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 2 October 2019. Also see: Luka Biong Deng, ‘Social Capital and Civil War: The Dinka Communities in Sudan’s Civil War’, *African Affairs* 109/435 (2010); Luka Biong D. Kuol, ‘South Sudan: The Elusive Quest for a Resilient Social Contract?’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 14/1 (2019).

139 Interview with Garang, migrant teacher, Haj Yousif, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

140 Interview with Julia, groundnut trader, Maper market, 10 September 2019.

family and I have nothing to help you.’<sup>141</sup> Everyone is ‘carrying his [or her] own cross’<sup>142</sup> and ‘living his [or her] own life’.<sup>143</sup>

There is widespread concern about this atomization of society. This is not a new worry but it has been exacerbated by both the pressures of the individualized hunt for income and the increasing numbers of migrant workers leaving their families for towns, the military or to go north across the border to Sudan. The youth union shelter in the centre of Aweil, as with other social clubs, provides a space for young men in particular to discuss stresses and support one another.<sup>144</sup> Although social norms are changing, young men and women still help organize marriages and funerals together, to keep up proper standards and observe traditional celebrations.<sup>145</sup> In Aweil and its surrounding villages, too, young men and women organize cultural dance events in market spaces to motivate people with a sense of community and draw people into society.<sup>146</sup>

Many people in South Sudan and in Khartoum emphasize the societal changes as a result of financial pressure. Some changes are positive. For example, around Aweil, charcoal selling young men are now reasonable marital prospects because of their decent income, and are no longer seen as embarrassing boyfriends because of their menial and manual labour and dirty agricultural work.<sup>147</sup> As the costs of transport and food rise in both Sudan and South Sudan, however, people struggle to maintain old social relationships and education for their children. In Khartoum, Abdalla notes that he now cannot afford to transport his family and children across the city for a funeral or family occasion: ‘This has a negative impact on generational personality because in those days when things were good, we went along with our children with us for any family occasion, to get to know their relatives and to be acquainted with them and their culture.’<sup>148</sup> As job offers in Khartoum rely heavily on personal and family connections, Abdalla also worries that this will impact more than the social and cultural education of his children.

The combination of the aggressive monetization of the Aweil agricultural economy, coupled with the spiralling economic crisis since 2013, has built deeper inequalities between wealthy and poor residents. It has also undermined older employer–employee care and welfare systems. With a labour surplus and no collective bargaining, waged

141 Interview with Dut, motorbike taxi driver, Aweil town, 29 August 2019.

142 Interview with Cleto, migrant blacksmith and builder, Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

143 Interview with Martin, migrant blacksmith and builder, Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 26 September 2019.

144 Interview with Buk, volunteer teacher, Udhum, 7 September 2019; and interview with Wol, Aweil-origin migrant worker, Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 28 September 2019.

145 Interview with Garang, migrant teacher, Haj Yousif, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

146 Interview with Mel, seasonal migrant worker, Maluil Akoong, 5 September 2019; interview with local customary leader, Akuem, 4 September 2019; and interview with Bol, market worker, seasonal migrant labourer and farmer, Maper, 29 August 2019.

147 Interview with Peter, cattle keeper and farmer, Alel, 9 September 2019.

148 Interview with Abdalla, migrant teacher, Jebel Aulia displaced camp, Khartoum, 24 September 2019. The information in the following sentence is also derived from this source.

workers struggle to demand increases.<sup>149</sup> With inflation continuing to rise and creating price rises in markets, upon which waged workers are dependent for food, workers are trapped into longer hours and faster work, with a greater physical toll. Most farm owners now do not provide free food and tea, or emergency loans for medical care, for their employees. Smaller-scale farmers like Peter regret that they cannot fund these benefits anymore: ‘I had strong relations with the workers on my farm. Not only with the workers but my neighbours, as well.’<sup>150</sup>

There are still some moral lines that cannot be crossed. For example, Yual, a suburban market worker, explains:

When you learn that your neighbour’s kids spent a night without food, you would help even if you have only tea. You can also lend your neighbour a sack of charcoal to sell, if any of his [or her] kids are sick—he [or she] will give it back when they’ve burnt [made] their charcoal, because we don’t have money to lend one another, as we don’t save money.’<sup>151</sup>

Cooperative forms of employment, agricultural production, and mutual social and financial support have all been under significant pressure for generations during the long wars in South Sudan. The increasing monetization of borderland agricultural production and market labour, however, combined with a chronic economic crisis, are undermining the practical possibilities of collective work and atomizing borderland society.

## Remote information networks

Everyone relies heavily on swapping information: On daily changing market rates, rent prices, farm pay rates and job opportunities, on conversion rates for the Sudanese pound, and so on. This is particularly true for men and women who rely on day-to-day loans and rents to conduct business. For example, Regina who works in Maper market, rents her tea making equipment, chairs and shelter on a daily basis, and borrows charcoal and a jerrycan of water on a daily loan, relying on at least breaking even each day.<sup>152</sup> Long-distance information is also critical for decision-making: Young men in particular swap information on migrant pathways across Africa, shared by other African migrants in Khartoum and Cairo, and the legal processes and abuses in Europe.<sup>153</sup>

Many people, especially women and rural residents, have no access to phones and instead rely on local radio (such as Akol Yam FM in Aweil) and on hearsay news in the

149 Interview with local customary leader, Akuem, 4 September 2019.

150 Interview with Peter, cattle keeper and farmer, Alel, 9 September 2019.

151 Interview with Yual, farm and market worker, Camanguei, 3 September 2019.

152 Interview with Regina, tea maker in Maper market, Aweil, and former beer brewer in Khartoum, Maper market, 10 September 2019.

153 Interview with Samson, migrant worker and teacher from Raga, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

street.<sup>154</sup> Young men who have never travelled northward go with friends who were born in Darfur or Khartoum in order to learn the ropes.<sup>155</sup> Those who do have phones struggle with the cost of direct calls or even the expense of texting someone to set a time for an internet voice call.<sup>156</sup> (Residents across the Aweil region were very concerned for friends and relatives in Khartoum during the Sudan uprising and so shared information from regular phone calls.<sup>157</sup>) Short and limited conversations are ‘really very painful’ for many people,<sup>158</sup> particularly for residents who cannot read, and therefore cannot read Facebook, and who have lost contact with friends in Khartoum who they fear are taking the ‘desperate journey to Europe’.<sup>159</sup>

Young men and women who have access to phones and signals frequently use WhatsApp and Facebook.<sup>160</sup> A teacher in Khartoum, Adhel, is a member of a private WhatsApp group connecting members of her village across the region: ‘We can invite elders such as our fathers and uncles, and even those who cannot write can send their comments through voice clips. We can discuss things about marriage, even things in our [vernacular] language.’<sup>161</sup> Facebook is also used to share information about good schools and fees; however, many young people indicate that they avoid discussing political issues or using political discourse on the site.<sup>162</sup> As Simon explains:

For me, I can’t discuss much. What I see sometimes... You know, you post a lot of things to challenge the government and they will deal with you. So it’s better to be silent but I think there will be time when you can go and demand from the government what you want.<sup>163</sup>

This information network, and the new online opportunities for discussion of cultural, social and political issues and the economic crisis, are crucial for maintaining social security among young migrant men and women. Online forums are, however, only available to the people with time and money to access them.

154 Interview with Angelina, farmer, Alel, 30 August 2019. Approximately 20% of people in South Sudan have a mobile phone, 2.5% of the population use social media, and around 8% of people use the internet. World Bank data, accessed 18 September 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=SS>; and Digital2020 data, accessed 17 September 2020, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-south-sudan>.

155 Interview with Mel, seasonal migrant worker, Maluil Akoong, 5 September 2019.

156 Interview with Haw, migrant teacher, Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 28 September 2019.

157 Interview with Garang, migrant teacher, Haj Yousif, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

158 Interview with Abdalla, migrant teacher in Jebel Aulia displaced camp, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

159 Interview with Mel, seasonal migrant worker, Maluil Akoong, 5 September 2019.

160 Interview with Deng, student representative, Juba, 25 September 2019.

161 Interview with Adhel, teacher and preacher from Aweil, Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 29 September 2019.

162 Interview with Wol and Yom, students and part-time market workers, Ayuung market, Aweil, 10 September 2019.

163 Interview with Simon, money transfer agency worker, Juba, 3 September 2019.

## 6. Conclusion

The political and economic crises in South Sudan through the 2010s have transformed the political economy of the country and had a serious impact on the life prospects for many young people. The military sector now dominates paid employment options for aspirational young people in South Sudan, especially for young men. Because of this, security and military reforms and demobilizations should not be seen in isolation from the wider question of employment, livelihoods, educational opportunities and migration.

On the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borders with Sudan, and across the region, labour markets are closely controlled by elites with a monopoly on economic and military power. The cheap labour of young people is an essential ingredient for the success of their business and agricultural interests. The interests of this class of people control the migrant pathways that young migrants must negotiate during their attempts to escape the borderland. For these local elites, the current borderland system—a semi-captive population and regulated border regime—works for their own economic betterment. Therefore, improving tertiary education systems or collective labour organization would likely disadvantage these existing elites, who generally seek to control or break these systems of mutual aid and opportunity. Lack of education, secure employment and life prospects combine to drive young men and women onward across borders, towards Egypt, Libya and Europe.

This forms the context and creates the drivers for the out-migrations that many young people now make from the borderlands of South Sudan. For most extremely poor young men and women living in these regions, resistance to this system involves leaving, irrespective of what the external perception of the risks may be. There is little hope for real change in the near future. As Garang, a teacher in Khartoum, says, ‘There are young men going to Libya and getting drowned in the ocean just because they were trying to improve their living conditions. But up to now, there is nothing new.’<sup>164</sup>

This cross-border political economy fuels a common feeling of despair and entrapment among people living in the borderlands. Many people feel trapped by the prospect of repeated disasters, such as business collapse, unaffordable illnesses, climactic pressures on farming and risky migrations across borders to unstable neighbours. As one customary leader in Maper explains, ‘Ten or fifteen years is little time. These elites will still be around. And I do not see significant changes for the lives of young people.’<sup>165</sup> As Cleto, a migrant blacksmith and builder in Khartoum, comments, ‘In the meantime, young people are lost. There is no progress at all.’<sup>166</sup>

164 Interview with Garang, migrant teacher, Haj Yousif, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

165 Interview with local customary leader, Maper market, 3 September 2019.

166 Interview with Cleto, migrant blacksmith and builder, Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

## 7. Policy considerations

### Humanitarian or developmental work

Humanitarian or developmental work focused on agricultural subsistence, individual resilience and entrepreneurship does not necessarily help young people navigate the exploitative and volatile rural market economy. With limited access to investment capital, the risks of economic and climactic shocks destroying investments, the threat of land expropriation, and a general lack of healthcare and good education in rural areas, most young men and women have few prospects of building independent and secure livelihoods. Many young people find themselves trapped in paid agricultural or market work in order to balance the risks and demands of everyday life and invest in their personal and family well-being and education. This cheap waged labour serves the interests of the local and national individuals who have monopolized land and trade wealth, including powerful political-military elites and their economic and military investments.

Livelihood training, statebuilding investments and aid interventions can often play into this exploitative market rather than challenge it. Investing in state border controls often helps perpetuate the control of this captive labour market, while the policy of purchasing food aid at the local level helps wealthy residents profit from stores of grain kept specifically for peak market prices. Residents also critique new ideas of direct cash transfers: 'Intervention in the form of food cannot change anything, particularly for the youths whose future is very dark, like orphans and the undereducated. ... If you distribute cattle or money to them, this is still not help.'<sup>167</sup>

According to local theories, cash transfers will just be absorbed into the logics of this system rather than disrupt it. Skills training is no use if there is no investment in construction, in industry, secure access to agricultural land and machinery, or ensuring sufficient disposable income to spend on new locally made clothes, knives and cooking equipment, rather than the cheap plastics that arrive from north of the border or are given out by aid agencies.<sup>168</sup>

Borderland residents and migrants are clear that there can be no real political reform without reform of this economy. This is because the power of local military authorities and state elites rests, to a significant extent, on the financial and military resources they gained (and still gain) from their exploitation of cheap local labour as agricultural and military workers. There is, however, almost no investment in collective or cooperative action or forms of employment that might challenge this atomizing local economy

167 Interview with Peter, cattle keeper and farmer, Alel, 9 September 2019; and interview with Akuin, unemployed student, Malek Alel, 6 September 2019.

168 Interview with Julia, groundnut trader, Maper market, 10 September 2019.

or go beyond individualized aid programming. Older forms of collective farming and cooperative employment require funds and time that cannot be spared in a protracted economic crisis. Collective bargaining for better wages or improved employment standards on large privately owned farms is both expensive—the time needed for collective organization, plus the financial costs associated with it, are off-putting—and politically risky.

### **Security sector reform (SSR)**

Security sector reform cannot be undertaken without a detailed understanding of cross-border labour markets that trap and encourage desperate young men, and some women, into armed work (whether in government or rebel service). Military and security work in the wider region relies on mobile young men and women whose economic and educational aspirations have been cut off at home. A significant lack of other waged work in the civil sector, and very limited paths to expensive, often privatized secondary and higher education, work together to create a large pool of poor but aspiring young people who see the possibilities for education and security in the army, which is the main employer across South Sudan. Many people in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderland, and in Khartoum and Juba, believe that this underinvestment in the education sector and the borderland economy is tactical on the part of political and military elites, who benefit from the funnelling of young people towards military recruitment. To tackle this, investment in demobilization and military reform must be tied to wider investment in the labour and educational markets, beyond basic trade and private enterprise.

### **Efforts for fundamental political reform**

Attempts by civil society organizations to engender fundamental political reform need to engage with local political and economic analysis, including how they might be changed. Young people in South Sudan, aware of the risks of open political discussion, talk about change quietly and online. Public meetings that do take place in borderland areas are generally limited to those sponsored by the government because ‘the threat is unity among young people’.<sup>169</sup> At present, the idea that public demonstrations—the kind that contributed to political change in Sudan—might happen in South Sudan is a joke: ‘I think for South Sudanese young people, they will not just be killed. They will be minced by grinder machines in front of the people, with their blood spreading on the main road, so that everyone will see this is what will happen in South Sudan [if people protest].’<sup>170</sup>

169 Interview with Deng, student representative, Juba, 25 September 2019; and interview with Bol, market worker, Akuem, 4 September 2019.

170 Interview with Abdalla, migrant teacher in Jebel Aulia displaced camp, Khartoum, 24 September 2019; and interview with Adhel, teacher and preacher from Aweil, Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 29 September 2019.

There is little belief in the prospects for peace and structural reform of the political economy in South Sudan in the near future. For most young people, resistance to this violent system, and the means of surviving economic precarity, along with repeated climate and political catastrophes, involves out-migration to Sudan, Ethiopia, Egypt, Libya and beyond. While this out-migration is building new networks of social solidarity and mutual aid across the region, it is also a substantial loss and challenge to borderland communities in South Sudan.

Young South Sudanese men and women are clear that this political crisis and economic exploitation is not limited to South Sudan or to north-east Africa. They see themselves and the political economy they navigate as part of a larger global system. In Aweil and Khartoum, people debate the extraverted border control policies of the European Union in relation to a wider global framing of race, poverty, education and discrimination, raising the question of whether there is intrinsic human worth.<sup>171</sup> Many young people emphasize how Africans are restricted from migration, education and aspiration. As Samson, a migrant worker in Khartoum, explains:

I am telling the Europeans that the way they are blocking Africans just within their continent, constraining Africans from migration... I think this is the policy of keeping Africans uncivilized, in order not to understand the ongoing global changes that are taking place. They are blocking Africans from understanding how a human being is valuable.<sup>172</sup>

South Sudanese migrant workers are engaged in complex discussions of global human rights, racial exploitation, inequality and political change. This should challenge external humanitarian and development actors, particularly from the Global North. Interventions that aim to improve the lives and security of these young people must recognize their understanding of and demand for fundamental change both within the exploitative political economy in South Sudan and across its borders.

171 Interview with Abdalla, migrant teacher in Jebel Aulia displaced camp, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.

172 Interview with Samson, migrant worker and teacher from Raga, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.



## Glossary of acronyms, words and phrases

<i>al-rakm al-watan</i>	( <i>Sudanese Arabic</i> ) Sudanese national certificate number
<i>gol</i>	( <i>Dinka</i> ) collective family cattle camps
<i>Mathiang Anyoor</i>	( <i>Dinka</i> ) brown caterpillar
<i>qoth</i>	( <i>Sudanese Arabic</i> ) a rectangular area of land measuring about 4.6 m x 3 m
SDP	Sudanese pound
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SSDF	South Sudan Defence Forces
SSP	South Sudanese pound
SSR	Security sector reform
USD	US dollar

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