



Ebony Policy Note 2021-4

March 11, 2021

AN URGENT CALL TO ACTION: FOOD SECURITY AND IMPROVED RURAL LIVELIHOODS¹

Food insecurity is one of the most serious problems facing South Sudan. This dangerous condition is directly tied to economic distress across rural areas of the country. Improved rural livelihoods—and assurance of food security—must be tackled together. This Ebony Policy Note outlines four essential development initiatives that can correct these dual threats to political stability in South Sudan.

I. The Problem

A recent joint report from the *Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)* and the *World Food Program (WFP)* highlights the dangerous circumstance of food security in South Sudan.² The Report indicates that in January 2020, 45 percent of the population of South Sudan (about 5.3 million people) were in IPC phases 3 “Crisis”, 4 “Emergency” and 5 “Catastrophe.” Although this was a 9 percent decrease compared to January 2019 and an improvement relative to August 2019, it still represents a perilous threat with long-term consequences.³

The greatest prevalence of food insecurity was recorded in Jonglei, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, and Upper Nile states. Food insecurity reached record levels in mid-2019 (77 percent of the population, with 33 percent severely food insecure), likely due to an extreme rise in staple food prices. The situation improved by late 2019—with the largest improvements coming in Upper Nile, Unity, and Lakes states, while in Jonglei state flooding led to a worsening of the situation. Food assistance remains a major component of the household food supply for Jonglei and Unity states.

It was also noted that the extreme vulnerability of the population to high market prices led to record proportions of households with very high food expenditures during the 2019 lean period (78 percent against 74 percent in mid-2018). The situation improved towards the end of 2019 when these proportions decreased to 48 percent. The most extreme values of high food expenditure were

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² FAO. 2020. Special Report – 2019 FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Republic of South Sudan. See also: Daniel W. Bromley, 2021. Assuring the Future of South Sudan: Coherent Governance and Sustainable Livelihoods, Juba: Africa World Books.

³ The IPC classification system focuses attention on acute food insecurity and malnutrition.

recorded in Upper Nile, North Bahr el Ghazal, and Jonglei states [FAO/WFP. 2020; Bromley, 2021].

Solving the problem of food insecurity and degraded rural livelihoods requires a dedicated program to rehabilitate the agricultural sector after years of civil conflict. The *Ebony Center for Strategic Studies*, in consultation with the Government of South Sudan, urges immediate action on four essential program initiatives to help South Sudan create national food security. Each of the initiatives requires funding and the fruitful collaboration between the Government and our development partners. The four initiatives are:

1. Infrastructure to produce famine-proof food security;
2. Agricultural credit for capital investments and short-term production needs;
3. Effective water management in Jonglei, Lakes, Unity and Upper Nile states; and
4. Resettlement programs for displaced families now in Uganda and elsewhere.

II. Program Components

A. Infrastructure

Food security requires an infrastructure system that can allow changing cropping patterns in response to weather movements; and a transportation system that permits the movement of food from surplus to deficit areas. Accordingly, an infrastructural development program for food security initiatives must contend with three essential components: (1) early warning systems; (2) transportation systems; and (3) logistical systems. Each of these systems consists of investment in system technology, and in system operation—“hardware and software.”

1. Early Warning Systems

An early warning system must be capable of monitoring and assessing the status of several key crops and animals important in South Sudan’s agriculture. This information system must be based on a geo-spatial model of the country’s agricultural production system, with special reference to historic trends dating back to 2011-2012. The system must also incorporate a basic climate modeling component to allow reasonable forecasting abilities one-two years into the future.

2. Transportation Systems

This initiative must include the design and implementation of at least two aspects of a food-security system. The first component will consist of a comprehensive road network—with the possible augmentation of river transport (Renk-Malakal – Bor-Juba)—and a rail linkage between Juba and Wau through Tambura, Yambio, Maridi, and Mundri. The feasibility of such rail infrastructure would be an important aspect of this assessment. Enhancement of the existing road network must link the ten state capitals, and it must provide secondary access to important agricultural areas throughout the country. Creation of this primary/secondary road system must give consideration to essential bridges and stream-bed grade crossings to insure uninterrupted movement of agricultural products during the long rainy season.

The second component must entail the necessary components of a private-sector truck fleet consisting of large articulated cargo trucks and smaller vans able to reach most parts of the country where food is produced, and where it might be needed in emergencies. The general scope of this rolling stock should be specified and estimates of investment and operating costs should be provided. Financing prospects should be specified, including likely donor interest.

3. Logistical Support Systems

This initiative would entail the design and structural specifications of a feasible logistical system for South Sudan that would insure the efficient deployment of the truck—and possibly—rail and river transport components. Specifics would include an effective nation-wide communication system, security protocols, scheduling algorithms, and related information. Private firms comprising the transport system would be involved in providing real-time feedback to enhance system improvements on a regular basis.

B. Agricultural Credit

A necessary component of food security is access to credit so that farmers can smooth their production and consumption over time. This development initiative entails a thorough assessment of the state of agricultural credit in South Sudan. The analysis must identify existing weaknesses in the agricultural credit system and specify feasible solutions to current defects. The project must identify at least two possible models/approaches for creating an agricultural credit system, with each model differentiating between a capital investment (long-term) credit facility, and a production (one-two year) credit facility.

C. Water Management

Water is critical to agriculture and hence to food security. South Sudan's agricultural sector lacks a coherent water-management component. This development initiative would offer a clear developmental scenario for bringing effective water management into a central place in the country's agriculture. Notice that this initiative is broader than a traditional focus on irrigation systems. That is, periodic flooding, drainage, and water retention aspects must be considered. The centrality of the Nile to this initiative is obvious—many food shortages are caused by frequent and severe flooding in Jonglei state.

This initiative must offer a feasible development scheme for the country's "fertile crescent" consisting of four states—Jonglei, Lakes, Unity, and Upper Nile. The proposal must link comprehensive water management in the *crescent* to the continuing importance of famine-relief and overall food security of the country.

D. Refugee Resettlement

The fourth initiative for revitalizing the agricultural sector in South Sudan concerns the need for a program to re-settle almost 4 million displaced persons who are now temporarily settled away from their home village elsewhere within South Sudan, or who are living in refugee camps in neighboring countries. Their absence, a result of enduring security failures, deprives the country of an important source of labor and management in the nation's food system. Resettling these individuals, humanitarian concerns aside, will bring immediate benefits to the nation's agricultural sector. Their return can be an important source of necessary regeneration of viable rural livelihoods.

This program initiative must demonstrate that it will first clarify the security situation in places of origin of these displaced persons. Once that aspect is realized, the program must offer ideas for reassuring such individuals of the feasibility of their return, it must specify necessary assistance and support services to ease resettlement, and it must provide guidance for a program to help resettled individuals become re-integrated into the food system (or their previous occupations).

III. Next Steps

The Ebony Center for Strategic Studies calls for a ***South Sudan Food Security Conference*** so that our friends and development partners can begin the necessary work of considering the challenge of food security and rural livelihoods.

This ***Food Security Conference*** would enable fruitful discussions of these (and other) initiatives. Out of those deliberations there would emerge a refined development agenda, and a detailed specifications of the necessary steps to revitalize rural livelihoods and bring food security to South Sudan. The Conference would also produce detailed specifications of necessary costs, and proposals for meeting those costs.