



Ebony Center for Strategic Studies

Customs Road, Zain Building Opp. MTN, Juba - South Sudan

Tel: +211 921626272 | +211 923771456

Email: nyandengguot@ebonycenter.org

www.ebonycenter.org

'Advancing Critical Thinking and Innovation'

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Understanding the Idea of Taking Towns to the People in Rural South Sudan¹

This Ebony Policy Note is a response to requests from a number of scholars and concerned citizens for a written version of the idea of taking towns to the people in rural areas. This is because some of Dr. John Garang's ideas are documented while taking towns to the people in the rural areas, is not found in a single document. For instance, the idea of peace through development is documented. Moreover, his other ideas are captured by the SPLM Strategic Framework for War-to-Peace Transition, which was issued in August 2004 with a foreword bearing his signature.

Dr. John Garang's idea of taking towns to the people was revolutionary. It was based on the **macro-meso-micro conceptual framework for sustainable peace, economic growth, and poverty eradication**. Dr. John Garang used this conceptual framework to articulate his conviction of the bottom-up approach to inclusive development. That is, the development of rural communities was crucial for the overall nation-building project. He believed that by providing access to basic services in rural areas, people would be empowered to take charge of their own development. This would lead to a more equitable and prosperous society. The idea was to be achieved through a two-pronged approach - establishing community centers at the Payam level and the formation of sustainable homesteads for farming households. I would first contextualize the idea within the overall vision of development as conceptualized by Dr. John Garang. Nevertheless, I would encourage other associates of Dr. John, as our people prefer to call him, to provide their own interpretation.

¹ Prepared by Lual A. Deng, Ebony Center

I. Dr. John Garang's Revolutionary Vision for Development

Dr. John Garang championed, in my view, a revolutionary vision aimed at the heart of development, with an unwavering commitment to eradicating poverty² and fostering sustained economic growth. His multifaceted approach was rooted in the empowerment of our people through boosting education and health services, recognizing these sectors as foundational pillars for a prosperous society. Moreover, he envisaged an agricultural renaissance as the backbone of South Sudan's economy, advocating for modernized agricultural practices to enhance income and food security for our people. His strategic foresight underscored the significance of universal access to electricity, which he saw as crucial for catalyzing development and improving the quality of life across the nation. By harnessing oil revenues with prudence, Dr. John aimed to reinvest in the country's infrastructure and social services, directly aligning his vision with the idea of making agriculture the engine of economic growth and sustainable livelihoods.

The Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), under his leadership, aspired to create a framework where **youth and women were not just beneficiaries, but active drivers of change.** The leadership of the SPLM has of late began to implement this aspiration witnessed by the appointment of young people to lead the National Secretariat, Ministry of Finance and Planning, Bank of South Sudan (BoSS), and South Sudan Revenue Authority (SSRA). This inclusive perspective was fundamental to ensuring that the dividends of the liberation struggle was, development that reaches all strata of society. Dr. John's unwavering commitment to transformative policies set a path for South Sudan, an enduring vision that still beckons as a beacon of hope for progress and nation-building.

II. Community Resource Centers

In the heart of a future crafted in the image of Dr. John Garang's dream, stands a robust network of Community Resource Centers (CRCs), acting as bastions of progress and harmony across diverse communities. These centers serve not only as hubs of local governance, offering communal space for deliberation and decision-making, but also as courts where justice is accessible and transparent. The provision of equitable social services and markets within these centers fosters economic growth, creating a landscape where entrepreneurship can flourish, supported by fair credit systems that empower local businesses and households alike.

Integrated into the design of each center is a solar-powered grid, manifesting a forward-thinking approach to rural electrification that illuminates the path toward sustainable development. This power solution ensures that lights never dim on the potential of these communities, enabling extended operational hours for education, healthcare, and agricultural activities. Additionally, these multipurpose facilities include sport/cultural centers, which not only promote fitness and wellbeing but also serve as vital components of social cohesion and social capital, bringing

² He didn't like the usage of poverty alleviation or poverty reduction. His view was that poverty must be eradicated in South Sudan in the light of the resource endowments the country has.

together individuals to engage, collaborate, and celebrate their shared aspirations. In short, the tapestry of Dr. John's dream is woven with threads of innovation and inclusivity, ensuring that each Community Resource Center (CRC) stands as a pillar of support and opportunity that anchors and uplifts its surrounding locality.

Empowering communities through these resources involves a multifaceted approach that engages Payam-Level local government in efforts to foster a more vibrant community atmosphere. This empowerment initiative targets the intersection of educational enhancement and socioeconomic development. By aligning with local governing bodies, communities gain access to resources that catalyze economic growth and promote self-sufficiency. Through the establishment of markets, we can stimulate local commerce, providing a platform for residents to showcase their goods, thereby increasing their economic stability. Access to credit is also crucial, as it enables budding entrepreneurs to invest in their businesses and expand their operations.

Furthering community development, the integration of solar-powered grids stands as a testament to sustainable progress in the realm of rural electrification. These clean energy solutions illuminate educational pathways and power local infrastructures, which are essential for night-time learning and security. The profound impact of reliable electricity cannot be overstated, as it also fuels the operation of essential community services and facilities.

III. Sustainable Homestead: Dr. John Garang's Strategies for Rural Development

In pursuing rural progress within the contours of post-conflict South Sudan, Dr. John envisaged a future where eradicating poverty was not a distant dream but a tangible reality. His strategies were underpinned by a commitment to harnessing oil revenues for the greater good, directing them toward fundamental pillars such as education, health, and agriculture. Dr. John's vision was clear: leverage these sectors to engender economic growth, improve income levels, and lay the groundwork for sustainable peace, economic growth, and poverty eradication.

Reiterating the importance of education, Dr. John sought to empower youth and women, groups that are vital to the nation's resurgence, ensuring that they became active participants in South Sudan's rebuilding. By advocating for universal access to electricity, he intended to address the inequities that rural areas faced, allowing them to contribute more effectively to the nation's economic engine. Dr. John's strategies aligned seamlessly with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing the creation of an inclusive environment where each citizen could thrive. His leadership was about building beyond the immediate aftermath of the liberation struggle, focusing on a horizon where health improved, literacy rates soared, and agricultural practices evolved—ushering in an era where South Sudan could finally overturn the relics of conflict and stride toward a future of prosperity and peace.

The idea of a sustainable and self-sufficient homestead was created by Prof. Michael Roberto Kenyi at New Site in September 2003 to implement the call for taking towns to the people

in the rural areas. I want to keep the dream alive by elaborating on this component of the idea of taking towns to the people.

Michael Roberto Kenyi's approach is premised on the understanding that agriculture encompasses **crop, livestock, fisheries, and forestry**. Hence, the development and promotion of the idea of **sustainable and self-sufficient homestead** is based on a system of rural cooperatives in which several households share common assets (e.g., a tractor, land, etc.) and services (e.g., market, school, clinic, etc.). The average household size in rural South Sudan is, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), **8.7 (or 9)** persons per household³. The same study found that **57.7** percent of rural households were female-headed and **42.3** percent were male-headed. This finding is extremely important in terms of the SPLM stated policy of women economic empowerment.

The population of South Sudan is estimated to be **12.5 million people** of which 80% (or 10.02 million) live in the rural areas. In terms of households, the country has **1,997,900** of which **1,199,083** are farming households⁴. To realize the idea of sustainable homestead, each rural household will be allotted a land of **40 acres** for sustainable and self-sufficient livelihoods within their respective communities. A farming community will comprise **40** sustainable and self-sufficient homesteads on a total land area of **2,000 acres** out of which **400 acres** are for common facilities, such as extension services, demonstration farm, schools, community government center, business center, artificial lake, industrial park, rural electrification grid/station, sports/cultural center, and so forth. Such a policy would entail that about **65 million acres** (or **45.8%**) out of a total of **142 million acres** suitable for agricultural production will be utilized for sustainable and self-sufficient homesteads.

It should be made clear at this point that sustainable homestead scheme/program is voluntary and households will not be forced to enroll in it. The relevant level of government will, nevertheless, embark on a sustained awareness raising exercise for the rural population with the view of educating them about the benefits of such a scheme. In this regard, lessons of experience will be drawn from the *Ujamaa* scheme of Tanzania. Here, each and every household will be encouraged to aim at its own food security by engaging in mixed farming – raising chickens, piggery, dairy, crop, trees, etc. Moreover, this program of community farming through the idea of sustainable and self-sufficient homesteads is envisaged to restore trust and social cohesion to our people in the rural areas. This is because trust and social cohesion are underpinned by social capital, which is formed/accumulated through networks of communal engagement propelled by the idea/practice of reciprocity⁵.

The central role, therefore, of networks and norms of communal engagement is information sharing about appropriate techniques of sustainable patterns of resource use on the one hand, and

³ South Sudan — Inter Sectoral Needs Assessment Report- Rural Component (September 2022), IOM, Juba, South Sudan, June 2023

⁴ See Special Report of 2022 FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission (CFSAM) to the Republic of South Sudan, 21 June 2022

⁵ Putnam, Robert. 1995. "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," **Journal of Democracy**

enforcement of rules (rights) governing access to and utilization of communal land, water, and forests on the other. These networks and norms of civic/communal engagement – the working rules of collective action – enhance the ability of community-level mechanisms to enforce rules and adjudicate conflicts, thus ensuring social harmony and a sustained culture of peace. And **“when community-level enforcement mechanisms are rendered ineffective by public policies designed at the national level, common property systems disintegrate into open access regimes in which the state is the nominal landlord without working rules of collective action⁶.”** This further breeds insecurity of tenure, conflict, and social instability, a point well illustrated by the following passage:

Tenure security in terms of exclusive rights of groups and individuals can be a major basis of political and social power and status. When such rights are overly subordinated to the state, it follows that the political rights of rural people are diminished, and that democratic processes and institutions are undermined⁷.

In a renewed commitment to Dr. John’s ideals, efforts are to be intensified to achieve universal access to electricity, a catalyst for development of mobile money (e.g. mGurush) and other creative innovations that can stimulate business and learning opportunities, particularly among the youth and women, who are integral to driving positive change. The dream endures, calling for unwavering dedication to the fortification of institutions and the assurance of stability that can transform South Sudan's potentials into palpable progress.

⁶ From **Integration of Drylands Issues Into Country Assistance Strategies: A Review**, by Lual A. Deng (2000), Environment Department, The World Bank

⁷ Cited from **Promoting Agricultural Productivity and Competitiveness in Sub-Saharan Africa**. A report presented to the Global Coalition for Africa (GCA) meeting held in Nairobi, Kenya on 9-10 April 1999. The World Bank