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# ‘No one can stay without someone’ Transnational networks amongst the Nuer-speaking peoples of Gambella and South Sudan

FREDDIE CARVER AND DUOL RUACH GUOK



Rift Valley Institute  
Taasisi ya Bonde Kuu  
معهد الأخود العظيم  
Machadka Doxada Rift  
የሰሜን ሰላሳ የግንብ ተቋም  
Instituto do Vale do Rift  
东非大裂谷研究院  
Institut de la Vallée du Rift



Australian Government  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Co-authors: James Chienien,  
Dr. Santino Atem Deng, Yotam Gidron,  
Dr. Nicki Kindersley, Dr. Bichok Wan Kot,  
Jedeit J. Riek, Dr. Sara Maher and Gatwech Wal

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Cover image: Graduates and their relatives walk home from a graduation ceremony in Gambella town (August 2019) © Yotam Gidron

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Nyajal Pal

Yotam Gidron

Juba, South Sudan: Gatwech Wal

James Chienien

Jedeit Jal

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## Summary

- The Gambella region of Ethiopia acts as an accelerator of mobility for the Nuer-speaking communities that straddle the border between it and South Sudan. Several complex factors have shaped this mobility: people's need for refuge from violence over the border; their desire for education and economic opportunities; the kinship ties that reach across state boundaries; and the policies and programmes that national and international actors have put in place.
- For these communities, Gambella has become a channel to the outside world, whether through access to finance and capital, or by providing a route to move further afield (either in the region or across continents). Despite the extensive geographical dispersion of its people, Gambella has remained a critical hub. A complex web of transnational networks emanate from the region, which are underpinned by strong cultural traditions, particularly related to the provision of mutual support amongst one's kin—traditions that are central to Nuer identity.
- At the heart of these networks are families, kinship groups, and the Nuer institution of *cieng*, forms of identity that carry far greater weight than that of national citizenship. Through these networks, information is exchanged, support for schooling or healthcare provided, marriages organized, moral support provided, and new business initiatives developed. Digital communications, which enable people to stay easily connected despite the distances involved, have become central to the way in which they function. Without means of communication, key lines of support and opportunity can be cut off.
- Other entities also work with and through these networks. Prominent in Gambella today are a multitude of church organisations, many of which are organized transnationally with resources flowing in multiple directions. There has also been a proliferation of community organisations in multiple locations, often organized around *cieng* identity. Political actors, too, have sought to exploit transnational dynamics, whether to raise funds or build their legitimacy.
- These networks need to be understood as a system through which groups and individuals, which have often faced great hardships and threats, seek to enact independent agency and improve their lives. This system can be affected by many different factors in many different places. For example, during the last period of peace in South Sudan, those who were part of the Juba government system were able to inject significant resources into the system, but since December 2013 all parts of it have been under far greater stress. The system can also be a driver of new forms of inequality and vulnerability for those that have limited access.

- While there is a keen understanding amongst Nuer-speaking communities of the opportunities that this transnational system offers, there is also considerable anxiety about its cultural impact. Individuals living in Melbourne (Australia), Gambella and Juba face very different challenges in their daily lives, and are surrounded by very different norms and expectations. The closeness that networked living creates can, ironically, highlight these disparities and create conflicts and disagreements amongst those in different parts of the network. When the system is under stress, this has the potential to create problematic dynamics at each of its nodes, dynamics that in turn could be exploited by actors wishing to seed division.
- Transnational networks are central to everyday life in Gambella. Understanding the opportunities that they offer and the risks that they bring should be critical to anyone wishing to work with or support these communities. This is particularly the case in relation to the future of likely population movements in the region, which will be of significance to international programming both in Ethiopia and South Sudan. People's networks will inform both their decision-making around whether to move and how to move, as well as their ability to sustain themselves if they do.

## Introduction

Over the last 50 years, the various conflicts afflicting South Sudan have caused massive displacements of people. Latest estimates suggest there are more than 1.5 million internally displaced people (IDPs) within the country's borders, with another 2.2 million refugees displaced outside the country, as a result of the most recent conflicts.<sup>1</sup> Policymakers generally see these populations as highly vulnerable—being less able to provide for themselves and their families away from their original homes—and at risk of involvement in cross-border conflict dynamics. Thus, responses by state actors to these movements tend to focus on managing potential conflict, providing humanitarian assistance for displaced communities, and supporting, facilitating or (in some cases) forcing populations to return to their home areas.

Of particular significance is the lens created by international refugee programming, which guarantees a level of protection to communities forced by conflict to move. The sheer size of international refugee responses ensures they are subject to considerable scrutiny, meaning there is a vast body of associated research on refugee camps and the so-called 'durable solutions' the refugee framework seeks to provide.<sup>2</sup> Much of this literature is dominated by the norms of the international legal framework, which assumes that being a refugee is a temporary state and, during this period, populations are likely to be dependent on externally provided aid. However, there is considerable evidence to suggest this is a flawed set of assumptions.

While displaced populations are often forced to move by external actors or events, this does not strip them wholly of individual agency or the ability to make independent choices: understanding these choices better is central to this research. In particular, the report illustrates how mobility has become a survival and resilience strategy in its own right. It also explores how—as regional and international opportunities for movement have expanded—mobility has both shaped and been shaped by networks of mutual support that are fundamental to many South Sudanese societies. Furthermore, the report seeks to understand the impacts these networks have locally, and how this is understood by those located at different points in the network.

The research presented aims to better inform those working on humanitarian assistance, particularly to populations on the move, peace and development in South Sudan and the region, particularly international actors less familiar with these dynamics. Billions of dollars are spent on humanitarian and peacekeeping programmes globally every

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, 'Regional Update: South Sudan Situation', November 2019. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/73424>.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of refugee programming, durable solutions are generally understood to be voluntary repatriation to the country of origin; local integration in the country of displacement; or resettlement to a third country.

year, yet, despite being critical to the lives of millions of ordinary people, transnational networks are missing from most analyses. The report's concluding section includes a set of recommendations intended to help international policymakers formulate an informed response to these transnational dynamics.



## Methodology

This study, carried out by a team of researchers from three continents, utilizes a methodology designed to match the transnational nature of the dynamics explored. It builds on a 2018 study on the impact of diaspora connections in South Sudan, which was carried out between Juba and Melbourne and involved many of the same research team.<sup>3</sup> The intent of this study was to provide a deeper analysis by focusing on one specific location where displacement has been a major issue, and to use grounded research to understand the long-term transnational consequences of this.

The location of the study—Gambella, on the Ethiopia/South Sudan border—was selected as a typical example of a porous borderland area where population movements have been highly fluid, and where there have been many overlapping forms of state and non-state authority. It is also the site of one of the region's largest refugee programmes, which is currently undergoing potential reform as part of the policy process laid out by the Global Compact for Refugees.<sup>4</sup> The decision to focus on Gambella's Nuer-speaking populations was due in part to the fact that they are by some distance the largest displaced group in Gambella, as well as to avoid the necessity for researchers across multiple language groups. Individuals capable of working with Nuer-speaking communities were then identified in Juba, Melbourne and the UK.

The research itself was conducted in three phases across the four main locations. The aim of the first phase was to identify what key themes should be explored in the main fieldwork. This was done through conducting a total of ten interviews with well-placed informants in the UK, Australia, South Sudan and Ethiopia, with researchers utilizing their networks to identify individuals who had prior connections and familiarity with Gambella. A literature review was also conducted by three members of the research team.

The second phase involved in-depth qualitative fieldwork in Gambella, conducted by a Nuer-speaking research team of four people, all of whom had research experience in the area of study. More than 70 interviews were conducted in urban and rural locations over the course of six weeks. Interviewees covering a number of categories were identified by the research team in each location, particularly: men and women; young and old; those with complex mobility histories; and those who had hardly ever left their home areas. All interviews were conducted away from the refugee camps, although many of

<sup>3</sup> Cedric Barnes et al., *The role of transnational networks and mobile citizens in South Sudan's global community: A pilot study focused on Melbourne and Juba*, London: Rift Valley Institute, March 2018.

<sup>4</sup> The Global Compact for Refugees was agreed by the United Nations in December 2018 after two years of consultation. It sets out a new framework for responsibility sharing by refugee hosting countries and the leading donors to refugee programmes. For more information see: [www.unhcr.org/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html](http://www.unhcr.org/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html).

those interviewed were registered as refugees. Eight interviews were also conducted in Akobo, South Sudan.

The third and final phase consisted of exploring the findings of the phase two research through focus group discussions (FGD) in the UK, Australia and South Sudan. A total of four FGDs were held, as well as a number of follow-up interviews involving around 25 people. Participants in the FGDs were selected to provide a range of perspectives and were not the same as those involved in the first phase.

# 1. Nuer mobility and the Ethiopia-South Sudan border

As with all cultures where cattle-keeping has been a central part of livelihood strategies,<sup>5</sup> mobility and movement are intrinsic to the lives of Nuer-speaking peoples. For centuries, these communities have had to move for pasture, both annually according to seasonal changes, and over the longer-term due to changing environmental conditions. Anthropological studies have explored, with some disagreement, the precise nature of the cultural constructs developed to support this lifestyle. Fundamental, though, has been the ability to facilitate territorial expansion while allowing for integration with people of different backgrounds.<sup>6</sup> This includes a social structure that provides space both to members of a particular lineage and those of mixed background (or even so-called foreigners), thereby binding them together through kinship ties, and forming a community whose members are equally committed to a particular set of norms and obligations, as well as the sharing of resources.

## Identity, mobility and international borders

Today, such a community, or *cieng*, is commonly associated with both a certain territory (and in the context of the modern state, usually also a certain administrative unit responsible for this territory and dominated by the community) and a specific lineage. This structure has allowed Nuer-speaking peoples to move relatively freely within the region and beyond, while also remaining connected to a strongly identified home or home area identified with *cieng*. Thus, both mobility and geographically dispersed networks are built into the heart of the Nuer experience. These ties and networks are often referred to in notions of mutual support amongst the Nuer people, exemplified by the oft-repeated phrase, 'Nuer love themselves'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Alongside cattle-husbandry and agriculture, the Nuer engage in other forms of livelihood, such as fishing, hunting, collecting wild fruits and vegetables. See, for instance: Edward Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer: A description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940.

<sup>6</sup> See: Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*; Wal Duany, 'Neither palaces nor prisons: The constitution of order among the Nuer', PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1992; and Dereje Feyissa, 'Alternative Citizenship: The Nuer between Ethiopia and the Sudan', in *The Borderlands of South Sudan: Authority and Identity in Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, eds. Christopher Vaughan, Mareike Schomerus and Lotje de Vries, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> This phrase was used by many of those interviewed for this report.

While the location of the Nuer-speaking peoples' original homeland is contested in the literature,<sup>8</sup> it is widely agreed that over the last 150 years the environmental and political circumstances of South Sudan have contributed to a gradual eastwards expansion of Nuer-speaking peoples, towards its eastern borders and across into Ethiopia.<sup>9</sup> The Eastern Jikāny Nuer are identified as being at the forefront of this trend, with Gambella—the Ethiopian region on the border with South Sudan—now considered by them as part of Nuer-land. At the border, this long-term expansion and its attendant day-to-day movements come into direct contact with the wider realities of the modern inter-state system.

The meaningful existence of the border for those living in the area is a relatively recent phenomenon, as it was well into the twentieth century before either the Ethiopian or Sudanese states became a significant presence on the ground. Over the last half-century, however, this has changed considerably, with Gambella becoming woven into complex political economies on both sides. This has not always been to the benefit of local populations: 'For the ordinary people of the region, the advent of the modern state meant the loss of political autonomy, economic marginalisation, and enslavement'.<sup>10</sup> It has also fundamentally changed the nature of cross-border movements and interactions, as local livelihood and coping strategies inevitably have to adapt when different regulatory environments and legal frameworks are involved.

Individuals and communities at the edges of the state identify primarily with their *cieng*,<sup>11</sup> rather than the nation states of South Sudan or Ethiopia.<sup>12</sup> This allows them to self-identify as either South Sudanese or Ethiopian citizens,<sup>13</sup> thereby providing them with a range of options and opportunities. Examples of such opportunities include the relative availability of education or work, and the extent and nature of state oversight and regulation. Over the decades, these have varied on either side of the border, creating an environment where, for many, national identity has become fluid—a personal choice rather than a fixed point of reference, which can be changed if required. However, this choice is not available to everyone in precisely the same way, dependent as it is on the extent of one's networks and kinship ties with those in positions of authority on the Ethiopian side.

8 See, for example: Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*; Duany, 'Neither palaces nor prisons'; Gabriel Giet Jal, *History of South Sudan's Jikany Nuer ethnic group, 1500–1920*, Nairobi: Africawide Network, 2013.

9 Feyissa, 'Alternative Citizenship'.

10 Regassa Bayissa Sima, 'Changes in Gambella, Ethiopia after the CPA', in *After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan*, ed. Elke Grawert, Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010.

11 Identification with a particular *cieng* is relatively fixed, with transfer to another *cieng* a socially formal process.

12 It should be noted that the particular histories of these states has created a strong differential in identification between the two, with Nuer-speaking peoples always at fringes of the different iterations of the Ethiopian state, but a central actor in the story of the newly formed South Sudanese state.

13 The Ethiopian state has always resisted dual citizenship, forcing individuals to choose.

## Impact of the international refugee regime

Movement across the border has also been a core coping and survival strategy for local populations in the face of violence, and since the 1950s has brought populations into contact with the evolving international refugee regime. In the 1960s there was an emphasis on supporting refugees to live relatively normal lives, with the Ethiopian state providing land to, and gathering taxes from, refugees.<sup>14</sup> By the 1980s, however, Ethiopia's policy towards refugees had shifted towards encampment, with services and support provided in fixed locations and refugees' freedom of movement theoretically limited to camps. However, such an approach was premised on being able to distinguish clearly between refugees and local residents, something that has rarely been possible in Gambella, particularly amongst populations that speak the same language. Many examples of refugees transitioning to become Ethiopian citizens, and of Ethiopian citizens claiming refugee status, have been documented,<sup>15</sup> largely for reasons relating to the different threats and opportunities associated with different national identities at different times. Previous research has shown how the camps themselves became incubators of new kinship or kinship-like relationships, which in turn shaped decisions over return and resettlement.<sup>16</sup> This has also made counting refugees extremely challenging: Figure 1 is based on official UNHCR figures, and needs to be treated with caution in terms of its accuracy. Broadly, though, it reflects overall trends since the 1980s.<sup>17</sup>

The 1980s peak in refugee numbers came with the start of the second Sudanese civil war, which began in the eastern parts of then Southern Sudan. As such, Gambella became not only a refuge for populations fleeing violence, but a site of considerable political significance. The alliance between Ethiopia's Derg government and the nascent Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which saw the Khartoum government as a common enemy, created the political conditions for the Southern Sudanese rebels to operate freely in Gambella and establish it as their most important training base. The refugee camps there, particularly Itang, were critical parts of the local political and economic infrastructure, creating a firm link between refugee operations and wider politics in local populations' minds. In line with this, the steep drop in numbers in 1991 was a direct response to the change of government in Ethiopia, which resulted in the rebels—and refugees—being chased away. It is notable, however, that numbers swiftly began to grow again, with camps such as Dimma and Pugnido remaining key sources of refuge and opportunity throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

<sup>14</sup> Sima, 'Changes in Gambella'.

<sup>15</sup> Sima, 'Changes in Gambella'; Feyissa, 'Alternative Citizenship'.

<sup>16</sup> Freddie Carver, Dominic Naish and Fana Gebresenbet, Forthcoming context analysis of refugee-host community dynamics in Gambella, publication expected 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Data available at: <http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview>. Pre-South Sudanese independence in 2011, the number of Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia is taken as a proxy for those from South Sudan given that this is the only figure available, and that they made up the majority of refugees in the country. The current official number is expected to decrease significantly after the finalization of the biometric registration exercise conducted by UNHCR in 2019.

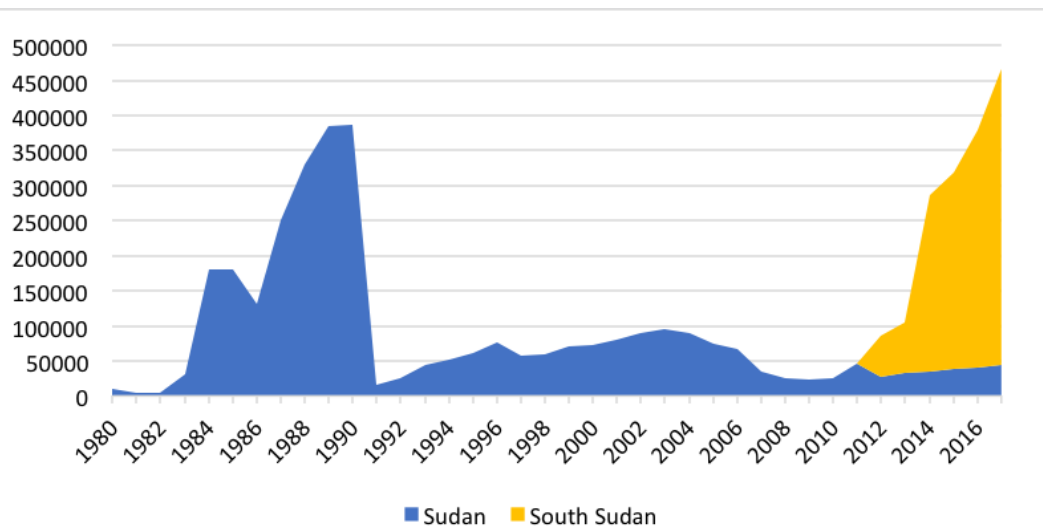


Figure 1. Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia by country of origin, 1980–2016

Refugee operations—particularly when numbers have been at their highest—have also provided considerable resources in a part of Ethiopia that has generally been too peripheral to justify significant investments. Itang, the region’s largest camp in the 1980s, and at one stage the largest refugee camp in the world, played a particularly significant economic and political role. A UNHCR report from 1991 describes it as a ‘small Sudanese town’, containing family members of ‘virtually every civilian official inside SPLA [Sudan People’s Liberation Army] controlled Sudan’, and an economic hub sufficiently dominant as to have impeded economic development across the border in South Sudan.<sup>18</sup> The refugee operation has therefore been influential in shaping contemporary mobility patterns in the area. Additionally, some of the infrastructure established around the camps had an important impact on Gambella’s development, in some cases facilitating the establishment of new settlements, for example around what were originally Bonga and Dimma camps.

Another key attraction of the refugee programme has been the resettlement programmes for Southern Sudanese, which expanded over this period. Though detailed global data before 2003 is not publicly available, according to US government statistics<sup>19</sup> almost 17,000 refugees from Sudan were resettled in the US between 1995 and 2003, with over 2,000 resettled annually each year between 1999 and 2005 (with the exception of

<sup>18</sup> UN Operation Lifeline Sudan, ‘The Return to Southern Sudan of the Sudanese Refugees from Itang Camp, Gambela, Ethiopia’, Nasir: Operation Lifeline Sudan, 31 August 1991.

<sup>19</sup> Until the early 2000s the US was by far the most significant country of resettlement for Sudanese refugees, partly as a result of religious politics in the US and the fact that Southern Sudanese people were framed as Christian victims of the Islamic Sudanese state. See: Feyissa, ‘Alternative Citizenship’.



2002).<sup>20</sup> Such numbers have not been replicated since. Post-2003 UNHCR data indicates that, of these people, the largest numbers came from refugee camps in Kenya, with a smaller number coming directly from Ethiopia, peaking at over 500 in 2006 and totalling just over 2,000 people between 2003 and today.<sup>21</sup> As explained below, however, the research conducted for this report indicates a close relationship between Gambella and those resettled from Kenya. Resettlement programmes from East Africa have brought a global dimension to Nuer-speaking peoples, something this report seeks to understand in greater depth.

Such opportunities, when combined with the persistent violence and under-development faced in South Sudan, have created strong incentives for the continuation—even acceleration—of the pre-existing eastwards movement. This can clearly be seen in the demographic changes that have taken place in Gambella.<sup>22</sup> Nuer-speaking peoples have constituted by far the largest group of refugees since the 1980s—even more so in recent, post-2013 movements—with their increasing numbers in Gambella traceable through Ethiopian census data. Between 1984 and 2007, the number of people identifying as Nuer-speaking increased by more than 500 per cent, over double the rate of increase in those identifying as Anyuak-speaking (who had been the largest group when Gambella was first created).<sup>23</sup> This has had a significant impact on Gambella's politics, contributing to growing tensions between the two ethnic groups that have, on a number of occasions, resulted in violence. Dereje cites the Anyuak as referring to the Nuer as '*behulet bila yemibelu*', or 'eating with two knives', given their association with both Ethiopia and South Sudan.<sup>24</sup> This is despite the fact that the Anyuak too are present on either side of the border. The power-sharing equation of the region, as defined by the Ethiopian state's ethnic formula, has therefore changed markedly.

Given the enormous economic and political disparities between the territories of Southern Sudan and Ethiopia, the presence of the border has also been fundamental to the economic development of the area. Gambella had been a key source of goods for Southern Sudan, going as far back as the cattle-for-guns trade in the nineteenth

20 United States Government, Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, annual editions 1995–2003. [www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook](http://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook). Pre-2012 it is not possible to break this data down between different parts of Sudan, so again this can only be used as a proxy for South Sudanese figures. However, the majority of those resettled at this time were from South Sudan.

21 UNHCR resettlement data is made available online at: <https://rsq.unhcr.org/>.

22 Under the ethnic federalist model introduced by the Ethiopian government after the fall of the Derg in 1991, federal regions were, as much as possible, allocated on the basis of ethnic identity. Gambella was one of a small number of regions where it was not possible to identify a single dominant ethnicity, resulting in it being allocated between five ethnic groups: the Anyuak (the largest group on Gambella's creation), the Nuer, and the much smaller groups of Majang, Opo and Komo.

23 Government of Ethiopia Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission, '1984 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia', Addis Ababa, 1984; Government of Ethiopia Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission, '2007 Population and Housing Census of Ethiopia', Addis Ababa, 2007.

24 Dereje Feyissa, 'The cultural construction of state borders: the view from Gambella', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 4/2 (2010): 314–330.

century. Following this, in the early twentieth century, the steamboat routes operating from Gambella up the Nile to Khartoum were critical to the colonial Sudanese state, until road infrastructure was developed further north. Indeed, prior to Sudanese independence in 1956, Gambella town was kept as a British enclave, thereby allowing the colonial power to protect its interests in these routes. While conflict and lack of economic development in South Sudan have reduced the importance of these trade routes, cross-border informal trade continues to thrive. Ongoing cross-border movements have been confirmed by REACH at the border in Akobo. Though the data is partial in its scope, upwards of 900 people a month have been recorded crossing the border in the direction of Ethiopia between October 2018 and March 2019, with more than 500 a month going in the other direction.<sup>25</sup>

25 REACH, 'Cross-Border Population Movement Factsheet: Akobo Port and Road Monitoring', monthly updates October 2018–March 2019. [www.reach-initiative.org/where-we-work/south-sudan/?pcountry=south-sudan&dates=Date&ptype=factsheet&subpillar=movements-and-intentions](http://www.reach-initiative.org/where-we-work/south-sudan/?pcountry=south-sudan&dates=Date&ptype=factsheet&subpillar=movements-and-intentions).

## 2. Motivations for mobility

Gambella’s Nuer-speaking peoples have a wide variety of mobility histories, and an equally varied set of factors have shaped such movements. The latter can be categorized into five areas: hardship in places of origin; search for the building blocks of a good life (particularly educational opportunities); economic opportunities; societal networks; and the influence of mobility and migration policies and infrastructure. One striking theme to emerge from individual stories is the complex mix of intention and chance involved—an inevitability for those without the resources or privilege to retain full control of their choices.

### A) Hardship in places of origin

The root of much movement in the area lies in the conflict and violence affecting South Sudan and Gambella over recent decades. These dynamics fundamentally shape people’s choices, causing the local populations to fear for themselves and their families. Conflicts have resulted in farmland being destroyed, the availability of essential services being reduced, and a general slowing of economic growth. This has left many people unable to support themselves. Residents of the Protection of Civilian (PoC) site in Juba, in particular, emphasize the terrible hardships they have suffered as a result of fighting in their home areas, including the violence and losses endured while moving across the border to Gambella.<sup>26</sup> Generally, though, PoC residents rarely frame their actions and decisions solely in this way, instead preferring to emphasize the positive choices that they have made. These are based on their aspirations for ‘a future good life’, rather than reactive responses to the challenges they have faced.<sup>27</sup>

### B) Building a good life through education

A near-universal theme that emerges among Nuer-speaking peoples is the desire for a modern education, either for oneself or one’s children. This aspiration grew considerably over the course of the twentieth century, particularly with the growth in Christianity during the 1970s and 1980s, which provoked in many people an urge to be able to read the bible.<sup>28</sup> It is now firmly believed that the best route to increasing one’s own and one’s family’s prospects is to seek better educational opportunities. As a result, many people frame their movements in this way, with one individual reporting: ‘A lack of education to their children will give them dark future’.<sup>29</sup> Another PoC resident stated that education

<sup>26</sup> Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with PoC residents, Juba PoC site, June 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with young man, Juba PoC site, May 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Interviews with Nuer-speakers, Gambella and Juba, May and June 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with young woman, Juba PoC site, May 2019.

‘changed people from illiteracy to literacy, that is one of the most important roles being played by the mobility history of the Nuer peoples’.<sup>30</sup>

One aspect of refugee camps considered a major positive is their provision of education, with the quality of schooling on offer generally considered to be better than that of local public schools. For example, several people in Akobo described how their move to Pugnido camp in 1996–1997 was driven partly by the fact that Akobo’s primary school had stopped teaching above Grade 4.<sup>31</sup> The educational opportunities provided by camps are even understood as a public good that should be distributed beyond the camps if possible: in the 1980s, there are accounts that prominent individuals schooled in the camps were returning to their villages in the holidays to pass on their education.<sup>32</sup>

People’s choices of where to go are shaped by the specifics of different educational offerings. One issue is cost, with a Juba resident highlighting that ‘education is one of the reasons that push people to move back and forth to Gambella because the learning in Ethiopia is for free’.<sup>33</sup> Another key issue is the language of instruction. While officially the primary medium of instruction in Ethiopia from Grade 9 is English, in practice many teachers at the better schools teach in Amharic. In the refugee camps there is far greater emphasis on English, which—given the opportunities the language provides for living and working across the region (for example, working in the aid operation in South Sudan)—has proven a significant attraction for local populations (whether South Sudanese or Ethiopian).<sup>34</sup> This represents a significant drawback to life in Gambella, and has prompted some to migrate to Kampala to attend English-language schools given the relative ease with which Nuer-speakers have been able to obtain refugee status there since 2013.<sup>35</sup> Fundamentally, there is a strong perception that better educational opportunities are available away from South Sudan, explaining the close connection between mobility and education.

One factor making education such a key driver is that it is a sustained need, particularly for those who may not have had opportunities as young children. It is generally seen as a bigger driver of mobility than other necessities, such as the availability of healthcare (although there are examples of people moving to access healthcare in times of need,

<sup>30</sup> FGD with PoC residents, Juba PoC site, June 2019. Data shared by REACH with the research team on the reasons given by those crossing the border in Akobo confirms this emphasis, with education given as the first or second priority behind why people are moving to Ethiopia from September 2018 through to May 2019, with only accessing food distributions cited as a higher priority.

<sup>31</sup> Interviews with young men, Akobo, June 2019. A total of 16 different men and women between the ages of 20 and 40 from different parts of the area had spent time in Pugnido, with almost all of them citing education as a primary motivations in moving there. Two university students living in Gambella town suggested that even without the recent violence they might have sought to move there.

<sup>32</sup> FGD with Nuer-speakers, UK, May 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with former Gambella resident, Juba, January 2019.

<sup>34</sup> FGD with Nuer-speakers , UK, May 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Interviews with young men, Akobo, June 2019.

including travel to Khartoum and Nairobi, where better quality healthcare is available).<sup>36</sup> For day-to-day healthcare needs, Gambella represents a critical resource for populations across the area, with the hospital in town, supported by MSF, better equipped and staffed than those supported by aid agencies in South Sudan.<sup>37</sup>

Education can also generate further opportunities for movement. In the words of one UK-based resident, ‘education is networking’, providing new linkages and aspirations.<sup>38</sup> According to residents of Juba’s PoC site, education and mobility exist as a virtuous cycle: more education provides opportunities to move, which in turn provides more educational opportunities.<sup>39</sup> Prominent examples of individuals of South Sudanese origin becoming successful in their countries of resettlement—whether as professional basketball players in the US or lawyers in Australia—provide evidence for this narrative in people’s minds.

### C) Economic opportunities

Underpinning the emphasis on education is a desire for better income-earning opportunities to sustain individuals and their families. Without access to capital or land, the availability of such opportunities is limited in Gambella, reliant primarily on public sector jobs for which there is significant competition from Ethiopians from other parts of the country.<sup>40</sup> This provides a strong incentive to move into the Ethiopian system before the end of secondary school, as this opens up a more reliable route to either tertiary education in Ethiopia—which the government has invested heavily in over the past 30 years—or employment in Gambella.<sup>41</sup>

For example, one older man in Lare described how, in 1999, he had come from Ulang in South Sudan to access the Ethiopian system, and that his son was now with the *wereda* revenue department.<sup>42</sup> A resident of Melbourne who grew up in Gambella, and whose brother has become a minister in the Gambella regional government, explained that ‘the benefits that South Sudanese get in Ethiopia is education’.<sup>43</sup> Finally, UK residents

<sup>36</sup> In two of the cases recorded in interviews, it was notable that after the initial move patients became either unwilling or unable to return, showing how a medical visit can often become a far longer journey than originally intended.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with prominent Nuer-speaking individual, Juba, January 2019.

<sup>38</sup> FGD with Nuer-speakers, UK, May 2019.

<sup>39</sup> FGD with PoC residents, Juba PoC site, June 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Due to the ethnically divided nature of the Gambella region, the working languages are English and Amharic rather than Nuer or Anyuak, providing opportunities for civil servants from other regions in the country where educational outcomes are higher.

<sup>41</sup> While UNHCR is able to provide some scholarships to refugee students to support them through university, such places are limited and in high demand. The Ethiopian government, meanwhile, has invested enormously in universities across the country as part of a nation-building enterprise, with all Ethiopian students having the right to attend (although the level of financial support provided is dependent on grades).

<sup>42</sup> Interview with older man, Lare, March 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Nuer-speaking woman, Melbourne, Australia, January 2019.

described an emerging professional Ethiopian Nuer class, of both South Sudanese and Ethiopian origin, that has been able to take advantage of mobility-related educational opportunities.<sup>44</sup>

Notwithstanding the immense challenges of life there, South Sudan has also presented important opportunities over the years. Thanks to the billions of dollars of oil money available to the government in the 2005–2012 period (between the end of the Sudanese civil war and the start of the South Sudanese one), considerable resources flowed through Juba, with educated Nuer well placed to take advantage of the opportunities presented. Some who had lived in the Ethiopia/South Sudan border area for much of their lives moved to Juba take up government jobs, returning only in response to rising violence targeted at Nuer-speakers and the collapse of the job market after December 2013.<sup>45</sup>

Even now, a number of factors have contributed to there being potentially greater opportunities in South Sudan than in Gambella. The scale of the aid operation in South Sudan creates employment opportunities for those with qualifications, particularly in Nuer-speaking areas.<sup>46</sup> Positions with international NGOs are especially valuable as they are paid in dollars—a scarce resource in Ethiopia in recent years. Additionally, some people are now moving back to work for oil companies that are attempting to operate in Nuer-speaking areas.<sup>47</sup> In general, people hope that peace will bring greater opportunities and allow them to return home.<sup>48</sup>

Cross-border trade—albeit weakened by the violence and disruptions of recent years—remains important for border livelihoods. Gambella town acts as a major economic hub for the wider region, with its cattle market a focus for a wide catchment area. Cattle trading licences are issued by the *wereda* authorities, with each *wereda* then taking it in turns to bring their cattle to market.<sup>49</sup> Some traders from South Sudan utilize these arrangements in order to avoid having to register themselves. South Sudanese cattle merge with Ethiopian cattle in rural areas, resulting in Ethiopian Nuer traders selling on behalf of their South Sudanese counterparts under certain circumstances.<sup>50</sup> While the bulk of trade is from South Sudan to Ethiopia, Ethiopian cattle is also being sold in larger South Sudanese centres such as Nasir.

44 FGD with Nuer-speakers, Cambridge, UK, May 2019.

45 This emerged from a number of interviews conducted across multiple locations between January and June 2019.

46 All of those interviewed who worked for international NGOs in Akobo had spent time in refugee camps in Gambella and/or Kenya.

47 Interview with man, Gambella, April 2019

48 Interviews with men and women, Gambella, March/April 2019.

49 Interview with man, Gambella, April 2019.

50 Interviews with cattle traders, Gambella, April 2019. The cattle traders suggested that such arrangements were more likely to occur if three conditions were fulfilled: 1) the individuals in question have particular reasons why they can't bring the cattle themselves; 2) kinship connections exist between the trader and the owner of the cattle; 3) a fee is paid, quoted as being 200 birr.



Similarly, arrangements are in place between Ethiopian and South Sudanese Nuer-speaking boat owners to facilitate trade along the Sobat and Akobo rivers. This is critical for otherwise isolated South Sudanese towns. A trader in Matar explained how his business had evolved from recording cassettes of South Sudanese music to sell across the border, to selling surplus grain that had been sold outside the refugee camps in Nasir, to now importing clothes from Khartoum that are in demand by Nuer-speaking people across the border. This last trade takes place through Ethiopia, with clothes taken across the Sudan/Ethiopia border far to the north, before being transported to Gambella.<sup>51</sup>

While in some instances taxes must be paid to officials when bringing goods across the border, this is generally only a concern for the northerly trading route with Sudan.<sup>52</sup> One trader said that his 'licence does not allow me to bring goods from outside, from another country, it works only here, in this place', the implication being that he is able to utilize informal networks in Gambella that do not exist outside the region.<sup>53</sup> Another trader suggested that he was discriminated against by Ethiopian security officials when crossing the border with Sudan: 'In the transports if they see that you are black persons, a place where you could pay 10 birr you can be charged 20 birr'.<sup>54</sup>

## D) Nuer societal networks

Of critical importance to an individual's ability to move is the social capital that exists in their networks. Generally, this is a resource far more readily available to Nuer people than financial capital. Key to this are the locations where family members are already living. On a practical level, such relationships can enable international resettlement through family reunification procedures. There are, however, much wider implications.

Moves are often enabled by brothers, sisters, cousins or others, who provide places to stay and material support while individuals explore their options in new locations. As one woman from a rural part of Gambella put it: 'A person can come through their relatives'.<sup>55</sup> For example, a young woman who had come to Gambella from South Sudan received assistance from her brother, who then supported her in moving on to stay with other relatives in Nairobi.<sup>56</sup> One man, now based in the UK, described how he was one of the minority of Nuer refugees who ended up in a refugee camp in Benishangul-Gumuz, away from Nuer networks, but then his brother, an Ethiopian citizen, was able to bring him back to Gambella.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Interview with man, Matar, April 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Interviews with men, Matar and Lare, March/April 2019.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with man, Matar, April 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with man, Matar, April 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with woman, Lare, March 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with young woman, Gambella town, March 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Nuer-speaking man, Cambridge, UK, January 2019.

One prominent individual, now living in Juba, explained how he had been able to travel from Akobo to Kenya in the early 2000s due to an uncle who was a pastor in Nairobi. This uncle not only secured him passage on a mission flight, but provided accommodation for him and his wife in Nairobi.<sup>58</sup> An older woman who had never left her home area of Lare indicated that she had no relatives elsewhere, which may have been a factor in her lack of mobility.<sup>59</sup>

Those with family overseas are also more likely to receive remittances and therefore have access to the finances necessary to move.<sup>60</sup> This dynamic, when paired with the extensive kinship networks of Nuer people, generates feedback loops that create opportunities for movement along family or *cieng* lines.

Closely tied to this family dynamic is a more structural point about the reach of kinship networks. While the Nuer-speaking peoples of the eastern territories are generally known as the Eastern Jikāny, they are further divided into more localized sub-groups, including the Gaajak, Gaajiok and Gaanguang. Dereje Feyissa has demonstrated that, generally speaking, Gaajak communities have benefited most from the opportunities presented by the South Sudan/Ethiopia border, as they have long been the most eastern of the Nuer-speaking communities and straddle it most comprehensively.<sup>61</sup>

Kin relationships, which cross the border, often interact with the Ethiopian state's vertical lines of authority, which end with local headmen. Where this is the case, it becomes considerably easier for individuals to integrate with local communities and, if necessary, access Ethiopian citizenship. This is often referred to as 'having a *kebele*'.<sup>62</sup> Such formal identification is important for individuals wishing to rise to public positions in Gambella, or wanting take up professional employment such as medicine. As a UK resident observed: 'Ethiopia[n] identification is more useful and leads to access to jobs, education, health care and so forth'.<sup>63</sup>

Non-Gaajak residents/former residents of the borderlands often have notably different mobility histories, particularly those who first left South Sudan in the early 1990s, when there was violence between Gaajiok and Lou Nuer groups.<sup>64</sup> This, however, does not mean it is only those with Gaajak identity who have been able to integrate in Gambella. For those without close kin to rely on, a key factor becomes the reach of one's personal networks. A resident of Akobo described how he had been able to remain in Gambella due to the friends and connections he made while in Pugnido camp in the 2000s. Others

<sup>58</sup> Interview with man, Juba, June 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with older woman, Lare, March 2019.

<sup>60</sup> Interviews with Juba PoC site residents, Juba, June 2019.

<sup>61</sup> For example, see: Feyissa, 'The cultural construction of state borders'; Feyissa, 'Alternative Citizenship'.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with man, Gambella, March 2019. *Kebele* is Ethiopia's lowest administrative level of government, and has the authority to issue identification cards.

<sup>63</sup> FGD with Nuer-speakers, UK, June 2019.

<sup>64</sup> This includes individuals from Akobo West and Unity state who ended up in Khartoum, and others from Bentiu and Akobo who had first gone to Kakuma camp in northern Kenya.

emphasized the importance of political relationships.<sup>65</sup> While these may coincide with kinship networks, it is not necessary that they do. An interview in Itang suggested there may be differences in how men and women interact with these processes of formal identification with state: when a woman there suggested her family didn't have a *kebele* in Gambella, her brother-in-law replied that 'she doesn't know because she is a woman'.<sup>66</sup>

It is also important to recognize that ethnic territories are far from fixed. While the Gaajak are well established on both sides of the border today, this was not always the case and—as with all ethnic groups in the region—has only come about following centuries of gradual movement. Such processes are constantly underway, and in 100 years' time boundaries are likely to look very different from what is accepted today. In Itang, an older man explained:

Even if you do not have relative here, you can come, because you are Nuer, you can stay with someone, the one who you stay near him, nobody can ask you, nobody can stay without someone. That person can do the work of the village, he pays tax, because he is a person from *kebele*.<sup>67</sup>

Another longstanding Itang resident described how when he had come to the area it had mainly been bush, with few people living there: 'That is why I have *kebele* [i.e. why I have been able to remain in the area with the effective status of a citizen], because I have been here for long'.<sup>68</sup>

All these factors speak to the critical importance of periods of settling and resettling, as well as how individuals in places of displacement are key to legitimizing one's presence and providing material support during these potentially fragile periods. The strength and sustainability of this moral and material solidarity, combined with the viability (or otherwise) of making a new life, shapes how long individuals are able to stay before having to move on again. Where job opportunities are limited, this time can be short. Residents of Gambella, as well as a Melbourne-based individual, described how their friends have been forced to return to South Sudan to look for work due to a lack of opportunity.<sup>69</sup> One Nuer-speaking resident of Akobo described Juba as having become increasingly hostile to Nuer people in the period immediately preceding the December 2013 outbreak of war, forcing him to return to the Akobo area.<sup>70</sup>

It is in these periods that internationally funded interventions—such as refugee camps or the PoC sites in South Sudan—can make a difference through providing material support. This is well illustrated by the story of a young man currently living in Akobo.

65 Interviews with young men, Akobo and Juba, June 2019.

66 Interview with a man and woman, Itang, April 2019.

67 Interview with older man, Itang, April 2019.

68 Interview with older man, Itang, April 2019.

69 Interview with Nuer-speaking man, Melbourne, Australia, January 2019; interviews with young man and women, Gambella town, March 2019.

70 Interview with young man, Akobo, June 2019.

Despite wanting to complete his university studies in Juba in 2012, he had no one who could support the expenses of his life in the capital city. In 2013, he was on a short-term visit to Juba when violence erupted and he ended up in the PoC camp. While he was unable to leave the camp for his first two years due to threats to his safety, his residence there eventually allowed him to return to university. Additionally, he was able to make connections to international NGOs and scholarship programmes.<sup>71</sup>

In Gambella, recent research has suggested that many of those living permanently in camps are unable to access any other sources of livelihood. Thus, camps are to some extent acting as a welfare provider of last resort for the sick and vulnerable, and are not seen as a desirable place to be.<sup>72</sup> Relying solely on the material support provided in a camp environment risks, however, reducing an individual's social capital, which is ultimately far more valuable. For example, one family had moved from the camp they were registered in, foregoing monthly rations and other benefits, to live with their relatives in another camp. Another young mother had fled fighting in South Sudan but had chosen to live outside one of the Gambella camps, seeing this as giving her more options in the long-term: 'I don't want to be a refugee, I want to return to South Sudan'.<sup>73</sup>

The fact that Gambella is part of Ethiopia, not South Sudan, does impose some constraints on the fluidity enabled by these networks. Access to formal positions of authority can be limited for South Sudanese Nuer, as they are less likely to speak Amharic. On top of this, there are subtler cultural differences.<sup>74</sup> For example, a man in the PoC site in Juba described an incident on a bus in Gambella where he had been beaten by a government official. He had referred to the time in the South Sudanese, rather than Ethiopian, way,<sup>75</sup> thus revealing his origins: 'As a result he slapped me ... and sent after us police personnel who stopped us on our entry to the house, fortunately enough our guardian came out from the house and saved us from police and harassment as well'. He described the state of being Nuer in Gambella as being 'like a person who is living between two rivers and yet to decide which he should cross into'.<sup>76</sup>

## E) Mobility and migration policies and infrastructure

A key factor outside the control of individuals is the policies and programmes that policymakers and other external actors adopt in relation to mobility and migration, as well as the physical infrastructure they put in place.

71 Interview with young man, Akobo, June 2019.

72 Carver, Naish and Gebresenbet, Forthcoming context analysis.

73 Carver, Naish and Gebresenbet, Forthcoming context analysis.

74 Interview with man and woman, Itang, April 2019.

75 The Ethiopian day starts at what is 6am in most other countries, meaning there is always a six-hour time difference.

76 Interview with businessman, Juba, January 2019.

Most obviously, a person's ability to move is shaped by the ease, availability and accessibility of transportation to and from their home area.<sup>77</sup> Locations that are easily accessible by road encourage and enable movement, whereas greater levels of isolation present challenges. Akobo, far from South Sudan's large urban centres and until recently accessible from Gambella only by boat or long, difficult long footpaths, is a notable example of the latter. The mobility of populations in Akobo has therefore been highly sensitive to small changes, such as the initiation of charter flights by missionary groups in the 1990s, which created an opportunity for people to reach Kakuma. This appears to have had profound impacts on the community there, which persist to this day. The building of a road from Matar (connected to Gambella town by a reliable road) to Akobo in 2019 also has the potential for a transformative impact.

Policies instigated by states regarding migration, border management and citizenship are also critical influencing factors. Neither the Ethiopian nor the South Sudanese states have sought to exert sustained control over border crossings in Gambella, enabling the kind of fluid movements described in this report. It is also important to recognize the differences between how policies are framed and how they are enacted: while in theory Gambella's refugees are meant to remain in camps, in practice it has generally been relatively straightforward to move in and out of the camps, particularly for those with strong links amongst local populations, enabling them to choose their own paths. Under the new Global Refugee Compact, the Ethiopian government has made a number of pledges about improving the economic opportunities available to refugees and even, in some cases, enabling 'local integration'.<sup>78</sup> How such policy commitments translate into practice in Gambella could have a significant impact on wider mobility trends.

International actors' policies regarding international resettlement have also been hugely influential. The subject was raised by men and women inside and outside Gambella, drawing on both their past experiences of these programmes and their future aspirations. A number of men, formerly of Gambella and now based in the UK, described the mechanisms behind the resettlement programmes to the US. These began in earnest in Kenya just after the SPLA's split in 1991, which had led to an upsurge of violence in Southern Sudan. The men explained that Riek Machar, then leader of one of the factions, encouraged people to seek such opportunities as a resource that would benefit the whole community. Communities therefore came together to provide selected individuals with the resources needed to travel from Gambella to the refugee camps in northern Kenya, where the programmes were operating. These individuals were selected on the basis of

<sup>77</sup> This includes transportation by foot, which has always been an important means of mobility in the area.

<sup>78</sup> A term that is poorly defined internationally, but that is taken to imply that refugees will be granted some or all of the rights available to citizens of that country. The Ethiopian government's definition is set out in the 2019 Refugee Proclamation, and focusses on the provision of permanent residence permits to certain groups of refugees, albeit on a temporary basis. Freddie Carver and Alemu Asfaw Negusie, Forthcoming synthesis study of Ethiopian refugee policy and programming literature, publication expected 2020.

trustworthiness and reliability, the expectation being that they would in turn find ways to support those remaining in South Sudan and the region. As numbers grew and time passed, the justifications for entering the resettlement programme changed too, with family reunification becoming an increasingly important route.<sup>79</sup>

Gambella was an important link in this chain for many Nuer, evidenced by the numbers of Australian, American and Canadian citizens now returning there on a regular basis.<sup>80</sup> Since 2013, the violence targeted at Nuer-speaking peoples in South Sudan has provided a renewed basis for asylum requests in Western countries, even if the numbers accepted are now far smaller.<sup>81</sup>

### A model for mobility?

Taken together, these factors suggest a framework for understanding the choices individuals make regarding their mobility, summarized in Figure 2.

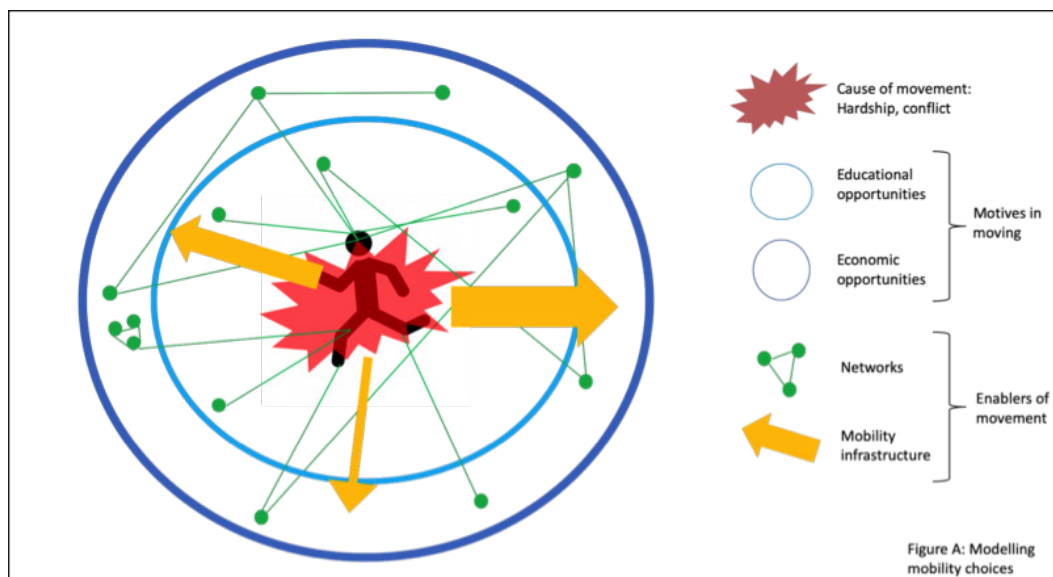


Figure 2. Modelling mobility choices

The three individual stories of mobility outlined below are illustrative of how these various factors interact over time. The various factors described above are referenced within the stories by the letters A-E, which refer to the sub-headings of this section.

The first story concerns a businessman currently based in Gambella. Born in the early 1970s in Nasir area, on the South Sudanese side of the border, he came to Itang camp in 1985 after the civil war had erupted (A). He returned to South Sudan in 1991 when Itang was closed down (E), but later that year was able to come back and claim a place

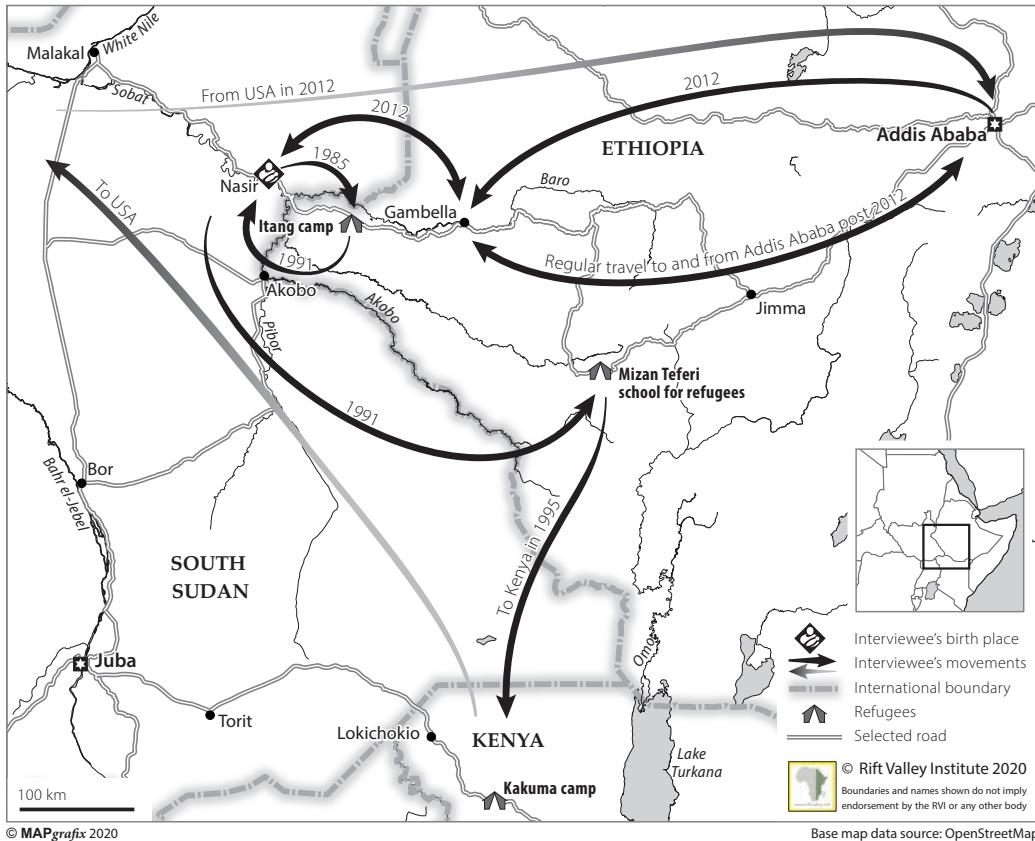
<sup>79</sup> FGD with Nuer-speakers, UK, June 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with businessman, Juba, January 2019.

<sup>81</sup> Interviews with Nuer-speaking men, Cambridge, UK, January 2019.



at a school for refugees in Mizan Teferi (which was highlighted by many interviewees as a key location for the Nuer in Ethiopia) (B). In 1995, he managed to secure passage to Kenya, where he was able to get a place on an international resettlement programme that took him to the US (E). He established himself there until 2012, when, inspired by the prospects opened up by South Sudanese independence, he returned to Gambella to pursue business opportunities (C). Due to disagreements with key local leaders, he found opening a new business on the South Sudan side of the border difficult, so instead leased land in Gambella town and opened up a business there (D and E). He remains a US citizen, and as a result has to travel regularly to Addis Ababa to renew his visa (E).<sup>82</sup>

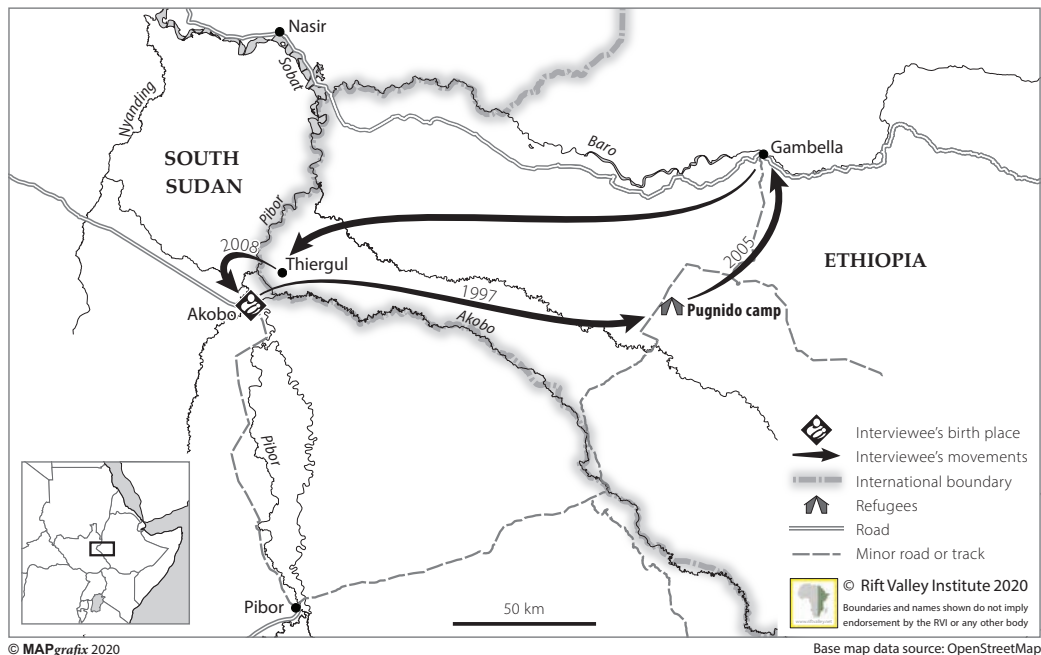


Map 1. The mobility history of a businessman born in Nasir and now living in Gambella

The second story, of a young man from Akobo, is representative of more localized movement within the region. Ten years younger than the previous example, the man—during a period of intense fighting and limited schooling in the Akobo area in 1997—moved to Gambella and lived in Pugnido camp for eight years, where he finished his education (A and B). Through friends he was then able to move to Gambella town and secure a place at the teacher training college, qualifying as a teacher in the Ethiopian system (C and D). He was then placed in a school in Thiergul, also known as Akobo in Ethiopia, a few miles from the larger South Sudanese town of the same name (C). He taught there until

<sup>82</sup> Interview with businessman, Gambella town, March 2019.

violence amongst various Nuer sections forced him back across the border to the South Sudanese Akobo in 2008 (A), where he was able to find work with one of the many NGOs now operating in the town (C).<sup>83</sup>



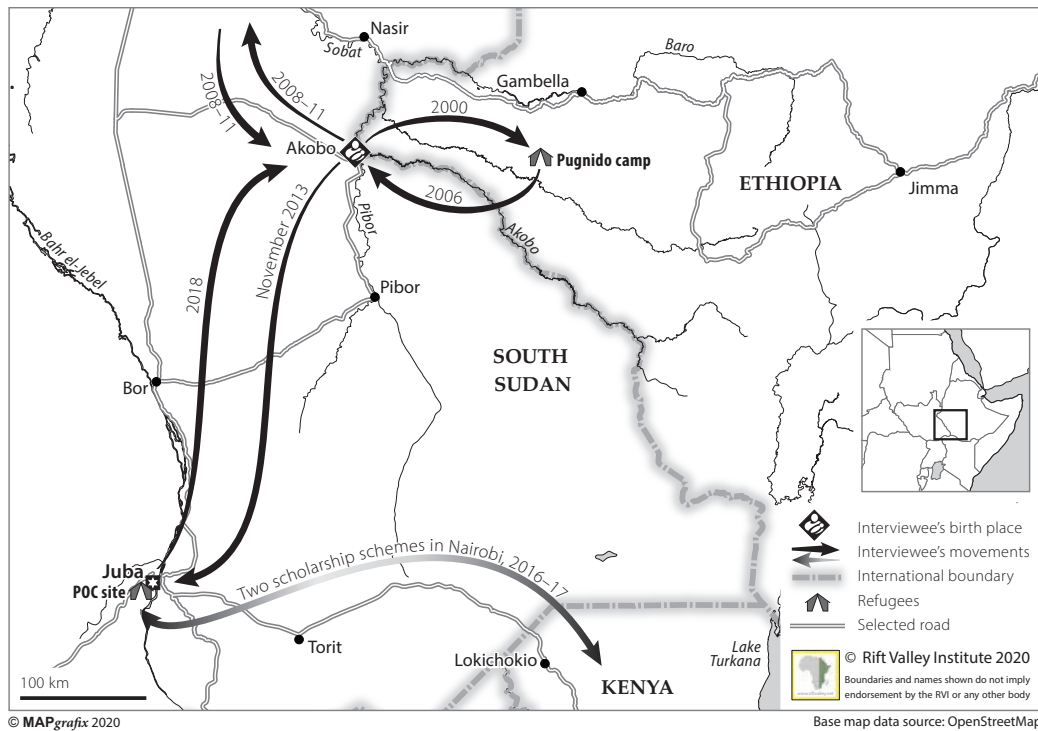
Map 2. The mobility history of a young man from Akobo

The third story, of another young man from Akobo with a notable mobility history, also illustrates all of the identified factors above. Younger than A2, he too moved from Akobo to Pugnido in 2000, having reached Grade 4 (A and B). He stayed for six years then, once peace came, returned to Akobo to find work (C). Based on his qualifications, the government placed him as a teacher. He then had the opportunity to go to the University of Juba in Khartoum as part of a ‘Making Unity Attractive’ project, which took Southern Sudanese students from across the country (B).<sup>84</sup> His year of graduation coincided with the referendum, with the government in Juba requesting that all students in the north return south (E). After the referendum he attempted to go to Juba (where the university had now officially moved) to complete his degree, but was unable to do so as he had no other support (D). Returning to Akobo, he started working with international organizations. In November 2013, he travelled to Juba on work-related business. He was still there when violence flared and so was forced to flee into the PoC site (A). He remained there for more than four years, working for NGOs while completing his degree and receiving two opportunities to undertake training in Nairobi under different schol-

<sup>83</sup> Interview with young man, Akobo, June 2019.

<sup>84</sup> Such projects were part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed between the SPLM and the Khartoum government in 2005.

arship schemes. He finally returned to Akobo in 2018 for reasons related to community organization (D).<sup>85</sup>



Map 3. The mobility history of another young man from Akobo

85 Interview with young man, Akobo, June 2019.

### 3. Networks, connections and mobility

Central to an individual's ability to choose their path through this challenging environment is the social capital available to them, particularly through the networks they are part of. The stronger these are, the more options and opportunities an individual is likely to have to move further into the region and the world although in some cases the challenges that are faced will overwhelm even those with the most extensive networks. The net result is a highly dispersed population. This population is then faced with the challenge of maintaining the strength of the network, and of how to provide mutual support to all its members across increasingly large distances.

#### The importance of family

Families are at the core of networks, making them the most critical means of communication and interaction across locations. Of those interviewed for this study, everyone resident in the UK and Australia was in regular contact with family in South Sudan and Gambella, while 95 per cent of Gambella residents interviewed who had family in other countries remained in some form of contact with them. Of the Gambella residents, all had family in South Sudan, while two thirds also had family in other countries. For just under half of them, this included family outside the region, primarily in the US but also in Australia. While these figures cannot be taken as representative of the entire Nuer-speaking population, some patterns did emerge.

The more remote the location, the less likely it was that respondents would have family in further away locations. Residents of Gambella town frequently referred to being in touch with, and receiving support from, family members in multiple countries. In Lare, a reasonably accessible large village close to the South Sudan border, the pattern was similar. In the more isolated and rural Matar and Jikow, however, the picture was far more mixed. It was also in these locations that individuals with a more limited mobility history were to be found. This is clearly related to the nature of urban living, which is more expensive and therefore—unless an individual has sustainable employment—demanding of external support. As such, there is a strong correlation between those living in larger towns, away from subsistence life, and those with extensive networks able to provide them with external support. These networks contain a strong self-reinforcing element, with mobility within them enabling the further mobility of others.

## Communication mechanisms

Regular communication is essential to the flow of resources and information through networks, allowing, according to one resident of Juba, ‘other connections [to] come in’.<sup>86</sup> The most common forms of communication are Facebook, Facebook Messenger and telephone, although the latter is considerably more expensive and is less reliable. Residents of Juba and in the UK indicated they also use group emails, WhatsApp and, in one instance, Instagram.<sup>87</sup> Access to a mobile phone network and the internet is therefore a key enabler, and so a critically important resource. Aside from the financial demands this imposes,<sup>88</sup> this acts as a major constraint in those parts of South Sudan—such as Akobo—where the government has obstructed mobile phone networks for political reasons. In such areas, access to communication channels is largely dominated by international aid agencies, thus providing a significant benefit to those who work for them (the majority of whom are hired from the local area). The military is another key source of communication infrastructure. A young man living in Gambella town explained how his brother, a soldier with the SPLA-IO, relies on his commander’s telephone for communication.<sup>89</sup> To circumvent these constraints, individuals often give physical letters to those travelling to rural parts of South Sudan, in order that they can pass them on to friends or relatives.<sup>90</sup>

In some cases, an inability to communicate causes people to lose touch with family or friends in different locations.<sup>91</sup> Conversely, finding new channels of communication brings new potential sources of support. One *kebele* official in Matar described how:

My paternal cousin ... he is in South Sudan ... when the war started we never communicated, now I heard that his telephone number has been found in Addis Ababa ... I heard that he talked to people in Addis Ababa ... he does not support us because we do not communicate.<sup>92</sup>

Physical return to Gambella by family members, for both short or long visits, are in many instances important milestones in cementing networks. While the expense involved—particularly from the US or Australia—clearly limits an individual’s ability to make such trips repeatedly, they remain a regular and significant occurrence,<sup>93</sup> providing opportunities not only to spend time with kin and friends, but also to conduct other business. Men (and, less often, women) often use such trips to initiate or progress marriage

86 Interview with man, Juba, January 2019.

87 Interviews with men and women, Juba and the UK, January 2019.

88 As one man in Gambella town put it: ‘The challenge to our communication is lack of money’.

89 Interview with man, Gambella town, March 2019.

90 Interviews with men, Gambella town, March 2019; interview with woman, Melbourne, Australia, January 2019.

91 Interviews with men and women, Gambella town, Jikow and Itang, March/April 2019.

92 Interview with man, Matar, April 2019.

93 Interviews conducted in urban and rural locations, Gambella, March/April 2019.

processes. Furthermore, individuals returning to Gambella come laden with goods and gifts for others.<sup>94</sup>

## Financial flows

Support from networks takes many forms, but by far the most common is financial. Such support is a moral imperative, neatly summarized by a UK resident, who explained that ‘what you have is ours’.<sup>95</sup> Money transfer agencies, particularly Western Union, Money-Gram and Bole Atlantic (an Ethiopian provider), are frequently used. An important constraint on receiving remittances is limited access to banking services, with fewer outreach services available in rural areas than is the case with Dahabshil in Ethiopia’s Somali Regional State.<sup>96</sup> Access has been a particular challenge in Gambella town during times of ethnic tension, with the main bank branches in the centre of town, over the bridge from the Newlands area where most Nuer live. Bank branches have only recently opened in Newlands, a response to the community’s significant demand for financial services.<sup>97</sup>

Ethiopian banking regulations also impose constraints. It is relatively easy to transfer funds into the country, but not to send it out through official channels. One member of bank personnel, in noting the apparent decrease in amounts his bank is handling, suggested that the unfavourable exchange rates offered by banks are pushing people into the black market.<sup>98</sup> Meanwhile, a trader based in Juba travels to Gambella to physically collect money brought there by relatives from the US.<sup>99</sup>

Money that does come through banks seems to be predominantly transferred in relatively small amounts—between US\$50 and US\$150—and comes mostly from the US, Australia and Canada.<sup>100</sup> Many people receive or provide financial support for schooling or university, sometimes for very specific, relatively inexpensive, tasks.<sup>101</sup> Money is also used for payment of marriage debts, monthly rent payments, and other kinds of ‘general welfare’.<sup>102</sup> In Melbourne, the highest priority support was for medical emergencies.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>94</sup> One interviewee was wearing a T-shirt bought by a relative from Australia earlier that year. Another talked about his brother coming from South Sudan bringing oil to distribute. Interviews, Gambella town and Lare, March/April 2019.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Nuer speaker, Cambridge, UK, January 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Based on observations from other research conducted by the research team.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with man, Gambella town, May 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with man, Gambella town, May 2019.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with trader, Juba, January 2019.

<sup>100</sup> Interviews with bank officials, Gambella town, April/May 2019.

<sup>101</sup> One student at Gambella University described how he had used this support to cover the costs of photocopying notes provided by university lecturers. Interview with male student, Gambella town, March 2019.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with woman, Gambella, May 2019.

<sup>103</sup> FGD with Nuer-speakers, Melbourne, June 2019.

The peak seasons for remittances appear to be Christmas and the January–May dry season, when food is less available locally.<sup>104</sup>

There is also evidence of finances flowing through these networks aimed at enabling business investments and growth in the region. These can take different forms: capital that allows Gambella-based relatives to start their own businesses (examples include enabling local bars to provide so-called cinema services through TVs and cable connections, or individuals to purchase grinding mills for grinding maize);<sup>105</sup> businesses owned by individuals based overseas, but who travel back and forth to monitor their investments (examples include a recently opened hotel in Gambella town and some of the boats involved in cross-border trade, which have US-based owners);<sup>106</sup> and individuals returning from overseas to run businesses in Gambella, often making use of connections developed in their countries of resettlement.<sup>107</sup>

Those with such connections are well placed to undertake import/export businesses, particularly in cases where great value is placed on accessing goods only available in certain locations, such as the clothes coming from Khartoum to South Sudan via Gambella. This can also be seen in the fact that Ethiopian highlanders appear to be living and working in Juba’s PoC site, utilizing their ability to access goods from Ethiopia that are desired by their Nuer neighbours.

Between 2005 and 2012, South Sudan was a key source of finance for people in the region. At the time, salaries in Juba were high and paid in US dollars, allowing individuals with government jobs to provide substantial support elsewhere, with residents of Juba even providing support to friends and relatives struggling in countries of resettlement.<sup>108</sup> Although funds are no longer flowing from Juba in the same way, the opportunities to earn foreign currency working for international organizations over the border in places such as Akobo, combined with the absence of opportunities to spend it there, suggests that such money is likely coming into Gambella. Indigenous goods from Gambella and South Sudan, such as dried fish, are also sometimes sent around the world to homesick family members.<sup>109</sup>

Financial support is not only contingent on being able to ask for it via reliable communication, but also tends to be time limited and need specific. A young woman living in rural Gambella said of their relative in Australia: ‘When we tell her that the family need something, she will provide’.<sup>110</sup> Elsewhere, a young man studying in Gambella town observed:

104 Interview with bank official, Gambella, May 2019.

105 Interview with bank official, Gambella, May 2019; Observations, Gambella town.

106 FGD conducted with boat owners, Matar, April 2019; Observations, Gambella town.

107 Interview with businessman, Gambella town, March 2019.

108 FGD with Nuer-speakers, Melbourne, June 2019.

109 FGD conducted with boat owners, Matar, April 2019.

110 Interview with young woman, Jikow, March 2019.



‘The one who provides more support is the one in America. If there is need and when somebody asks him’.<sup>111</sup>

Support is often provided at a specific time for a specific reason, such as when people are at secondary school or starting a business. When the period of most need has passed, the support will likely end. In some cases, support also has to be earned. For example, a young woman noted that relatives in the US had stopped supporting her and her sister through school when her sister became pregnant: ‘They interpreted that we are not interested in learning.’<sup>112</sup>

Individuals in the diaspora appear to see the support they provide in a slightly different light, often painting a picture of those in Gambella as being far more dependent on their support for daily survival than Gambella residents indicated was the case. One Australian resident reported: ‘We help them financially, most of them depend on people here for their daily life’.<sup>113</sup> Another man based in the UK suggested that it was very challenging to provide support to specific people for specific purposes: ‘People don’t see things as anything other than communal, everyone needs to take a part even if you don’t dedicate it to them’.<sup>114</sup> This discrepancy speaks partly to the communication challenges across distances explored in Section 4. It is also likely due to the resource constraints that currently exist across the whole system, with no particular community prosperous enough to subsidize others, thereby putting all elements of the system under greater strain.

## Other forms of support

Money and goods are not the only support provided. The ‘moral support’ afforded by regular communication with those in different locations is clearly important to those facing hardships, and is a central tenet of the Nuer support system.<sup>115</sup> In some instances, this moral support has a practical aspect in the form of community projects. One example is the Khor Wakow School Project, a charity initiated by a US-based Nuer man identifying as a ‘Lost Boy’, which seeks to support cross-border education and health projects in areas cut off from services.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Interview with young man, Gambella town, March 2019.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with young woman, Gambella town, March 2019.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Nuer-speaking man, Melbourne, Australia, January 2019.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Nuer-speaking man, Cambridge, UK, January 2019.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with young man, Gambella town, March 2019.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with man, Gambella town, March 2019. ‘Lost Boy’ is a term widely used to refer to a cohort of children who fled Sudan during the second civil war and ended up resettled in the US, Canada or Australia.

There is also a critical political dimension to the networks,<sup>117</sup> which has manifested in, for example, the National Dialogue process<sup>118</sup> emphasis on reaching out to those in different locations across the world. There is also evidence, however, that significant finances have been raised by different armed groups through mobilizing their networks.<sup>119</sup> While a careful line is reportedly drawn between kin-based networks and those focussed on political or military objectives, it is clearly not possible to maintain this separation at all times.<sup>120</sup>

While the SPLA-IO has been unable to sustain itself operationally in Gambella in the same way as the SPLA did in the 1980s, it remains an important territory for it. The population is a core constituency, and the area provides access to a number of critical locations in South Sudan. The kinship networks described here, which political leaders are also part of, undoubtedly constitute a mechanism through which it can retain influence. Support comes in a variety of forms and sizes, with, for example, a young man living in Gambella town explaining how he supported his brother—a soldier in the SPLA-IO—make photo-copies of cantonment registration forms for troops in the area.<sup>121</sup>

## Other bridging institutions

Families and kinship groups are not the only vehicles through which transnational networks operate. Next in importance are churches, which have significantly increased in number in Gambella in recent years. Traditionally, Nuer-speaking communities in this region have been linked to Protestant churches, particularly the Presbyterians, but since the late 1990s there has been a proliferation in the number and range of other churches, particularly evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal branches. This is partly a result of displacement, as individuals move between different locations and bring different affiliations with them. This appears to have been the case especially in refugee camps and towns, with new churches there able to spread into rural areas. Today, Gambella (and particularly Gambella town) has a highly complex religious landscape, something that is recognized in other parts of the Nuer network. As one UK resident observed:

I think the Nuer in Ethiopia—both citizens and refugees—are so [much more] impacted by this new development than the Nuer outside Ethiopia and even

<sup>117</sup> While this subject was not focussed on in the interviews in Gambella to avoid touching on highly sensitive issues that may have placed the research team at risk, previous research commissioned privately in the region has shown that transnational networks play an important role in the calculations of all South Sudan's political actors.

<sup>118</sup> The National Dialogue process was launched by the government in Juba in 2017 to provide a more consultative process for discussing key challenges faced in South Sudan. More information can be found at: [www.ssnationaldialogue.org/](http://www.ssnationaldialogue.org/).

<sup>119</sup> Although it should be noted that evidence suggests that funds raised for such explicitly political purposes are a relatively minor part of overall remittance flows. See Barnes et al., 'The role of transnational networks and mobile citizens in South Sudan's global community'.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with man, UK, January 2019.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with man, Gambella town, March 2019.

other South Sudanese. There are huge numbers of Nuer and non-Nuer populations in Khartoum, Uganda and Kenya, but they have not been so religious.<sup>122</sup>

A number of these churches have also had significant external input and influences, particularly from the US. In some cases, Nuer who had travelled to the US through UN resettlement schemes linked American evangelical movements with their kin in Gambella or South Sudan, leading to the establishment of new churches. This was the case, for example, with Evangelical Lutheran Church and Evangelical Covenant Church, both of which were established in the late 1990s. In other cases, Nuer students who travelled to Addis Ababa linked up with American missionary groups, subsequently facilitating the establishment of new churches in Gambella. This, for example, was how the Church of the Nazarene expanded into Gambella in the mid-1990s. Today, each of these churches has dozens of congregations in Gambella, both inside and outside refugee camps. Several churches, often with external support, have opened primary schools in Gambella town, with some even establishing private colleges that offer degrees in both secular and religious fields. The relatively new Trinity Lutheran College, which operates under Trinity Lutheran Church and is supported by American church members, is one of the most popular higher education institutions in Gambella today.

These churches seek to exploit pre-existing network effects in order to maximize their reach, including utilizing kinship networks to expand into rural areas. As one active church worker said: 'The church [of the] Nazarene is interconnected ... it works without border. We have spiritual sharing with church in South Sudan ... we carry out gospel'.<sup>123</sup> A missionary from another church used similar language: 'The word of God does not have border, we could go everywhere, wherever Nuer live all over the world, we will teach Nuer everywhere'.<sup>124</sup> In the latter example, borderlessness has created particular challenges for the church in question, as its outreach organization is only registered in South Sudan and not in Ethiopia. Without a licence, they have to operate under the auspices of another church, and try to engage with local politicians in order to secure the necessary approvals to operate.

Through making use of such cross-border networks, churches are able to raise resources in multiple locations, as well as facilitate mobility through offering short- and medium-term scholarships and trainings.<sup>125</sup>

Churches have also played a critical role in linking families separated across multiple locations, with one resident of Juba's PoC site reporting: 'There are so many organizations that take care of us, but to me churches are the leading institutions that connect people easily and permanently'.<sup>126</sup> Cross-denominational initiatives that are operational

122 FDG with Nuer-speakers, UK, June 2019.

123 Interview with missionary man, Gambella town, March 2019.

124 Interview with missionary man, Lare, March 2019.

125 Interviews with men and women, Gambella town, March 2019.

126 Interview with a man< Juba PoC site, May 2019.

in multiple countries—such as the Nuer Christian Mission Network—also help cement networks through religious conferences and evangelization campaigns that bring together Nuer from different areas.<sup>127</sup>

While the churches undoubtedly bring resources to Gambella, they also raise significant funds within the region from their congregations. While this may be understood locally as part of an individual's solidarity with their wider community, some of those abroad had a different perspective, perhaps influenced by the secular environment of their countries of resettlement. For example, one UK resident explained: '[The churches] drained money away from the members because they have to pay the tithe, offerings and thanksgiving gifts when pastors pray for them on special occasions. Too many churches around means so much money going out of the pockets of the churchgoers.'<sup>128</sup>

Externally raised resources appear to be spent primarily on special projects or outreach initiatives related to education or training, with day-to-day costs (for example, maintenance or construction of church buildings; funding of services and conferences) reliant on local contributions. In a resource-poor environment, it is therefore uncertain what the churches' net effect has been on local communities.

A handful of other organizations and networks exist, but seem fragmented in how they operate. Some initiatives are attempting to create genuinely global networks amongst Nuer-speaking peoples, such as the Nuer or Naath Global Network, or a recent initiative emanating from the UK aimed at establishing a Nuer Global Forum. Others focus on particular sections of the population, such as Youth for Peace and Development, or the Gambella University Student Association (GUNSA, which exists in multiple locations in Ethiopia as well as in South Sudan). Practical examples include GUNSA raising money from its members to provide support to those in need of assistance.<sup>129</sup> In Australia, there are numerous parallel organizations tied to different ethnic groupings in particular locations, such as the Jikāny and Gaajak communities in Victoria.<sup>130</sup> Finally, the Red Cross remains a key organization in enabling people to connect and find each other over long distances.<sup>131</sup>

127 Interviews with young men and women, Gambella town, March 2019.

128 FGD with Nuer-speakers, UK, June 2019.

129 Interviews with students, Gambella town, March 2019.

130 FGD with Nuer-speakers, Melbourne, Australia, June 2019.

131 Interviews with man, Melbourne, Australia, January 2019; Interviews with men and women, Juba PoC site, May 2019.

## 4. How people understand their own networks

The support received through the networks described above is fundamental to everyday life in Gambella. It is not only a core livelihood strategy for many, but contributes to emerging inequalities between those able to benefit in different ways. It is therefore essential to understand the wider moral and emotional impact of networks. How do they affect people's sense of themselves and their communities, and the wider social and political forces shaping their lives?

### Mutual support and Nuer unity

The concept of Nuer unity is extremely important in Gambella. In the words of one rural missionary: 'Nuer unity is more than a bullet'.<sup>132</sup> One resident of Gambella town said: 'We are against Nuer disunity, we do not want anything that could cause somebody to leave his school'.<sup>133</sup> A *kebele* official, meanwhile, stated: 'Nuer is one, Nuer does not treat another Nuer as foreigner'.<sup>134</sup>

In the context of the civil war, this growth in ethnicized framings of identity in both South Sudan and Gambella is perhaps unsurprising, with a strong and unified Nuer-speaking population critical to securing political space and resources. A contradiction emerges, however, in the parallel emphasis on more localized identities, particularly which *cieng*—where the core ties of mutual obligation are rooted—an individual most closely associates with.

Particularly in rural parts of Gambella, people often use the language of difference when describing Nuer unity. For example, a community elder in the Lare area said: 'Nuer love themselves, the only problem is that they always fight among themselves, they kill themselves by themselves and they are killed by their enemies, they divide themselves between their enemies'.<sup>135</sup>

This tension is supported by past anthropological research with Nuer-speaking populations. On the one hand, the notion of being derived from common parentage promotes a strong basis for a unified people. On the other, however, when a Nuer speaks of his *cieng* they are conceptualizing 'structural distance', identifying themselves with a specific local community while cutting themselves off from others.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>132</sup> Interview with a missionary man, Lare, March 2019.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with man, Gambella town, March 2019.

<sup>134</sup> Interview with *kebele* official, Lare, March 2019.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with community elder, Lare, March 2019.

<sup>136</sup> Duany, 'Neither palaces nor prisons', p. 134.

Relying on identity alone to foster unity can therefore be problematic, particularly in regard to an identity as broad as that of 'Nuer'. It is in this context that the language of the Nuer 'loving themselves' must be understood, emphasizing that Nuer unity is not merely the result of a particular identity but also the work of the mutual support and communication networks that bind people together. As one resident of Gambella town said: 'The way in which Nuer *work together* could be referred to as unity'.<sup>137</sup> Another explicitly elided the networks themselves with peoples' ability to communicate: 'With regard to how this network could be referred, I think it can be called Nuer unity or the Nuer communication network'.<sup>138</sup> A third went further, suggesting that how people operate within these collaborative networks is in fact more important than other markers of identity:

To us the Nuer ... anyone who provides support, that person could have relationship with you, one cannot be trusted simply because he is Nuer ... the fact someone bears six marks and speaks Nuer language does not make that person suitable to be trusted by Nuer unless that person stood firmly for this problem that the Nuer face.<sup>139</sup>

Culturally, *cieng* has primarily been defined in terms of relationships between people who live together in peace, share resources and respect a set of norms and priorities, and not solely by lineage affiliations. It is these notions of sharing that appear to be increasingly tested as communities disperse and levels of inequality amongst members grow. Consequently, breakdowns in the system—for example, those caused by the war—are seen as damaging to all Nuer. A female student at Gambella university explained:

That time in South Sudan people were very cooperative, when you arrive in someone's house you will be served with water, even a family that you do not know, now here in Gambella when you come to someone's house, people will just look at you unless you ask for water, *now Nuer become bad*, that is not the life they had in the past.<sup>140</sup>

In Juba, when rumours were spread about the potential negative implications of being internationally resettled, the link to support was also made explicit: 'These rumours were circulated that if you go to international diaspora you like dead person, in which you will never see or meet them physically, or do something positive for your relatives'.<sup>141</sup>

An important notion related to this is *guäl kuaknj*. Translated, this simply means 'the sharing of resources', but implied within the original words are ideas of circulation, with resources moving between different hands to ensure everyone has their turn. Such language is closely in line with processes of distribution and redistribution described

137 Interview with man, Gambella town, March 2019, emphasis added.

138 Interview with man, Gambella town, March 2019.

139 Interview with man, Gambella town, March 2019.

140 Interview with young woman, Gambella town, March 2019, emphasis added.

141 FGD with Juba PoC residents, Juba, June 2019.

by anthropologists as functioning in rural Nuer villages.<sup>142</sup> For those in rural areas, the cross-border movement of cattle—whether for access to markets or just for seasonal grazing—is seen as bringing people together and creating strong connections:

When they come here, their leaders there, here they will be under these leaders, when they return they will work in their sides, their children attend school as our people and then they will go to school, even if he is from the at side, that is the same for health service.<sup>143</sup>

In times of peace, such ideas allow those from different *cieng* to interact and work together peacefully, resolving problems when they arise and even, in some cases, developing merged and overlapping identities. A very different approach is taken, however, with non-Nuer cattle-keepers passing through the area.

### The impact of dispersal

A complex web of thick connections develops when communities and kin are in physical proximity, with economic, social and political bonds emerging. In the context of Gambella and South Sudan, the fact that these connections have been operating across a national border has not been a significant constraint, with—as we have seen—significant opportunities arising for both Ethiopian and South Sudanese citizens. The sustained impact of the conflict, however, has been to disperse networks far more widely.

Indeed, the language used to describe the conflict is sometimes framed in terms of dispersal. A commonly used phrase is *'ni en mē ci yow dak'*, which translates as 'when the world got destroyed' but also refers to the process of dispersal and separation. For one resident of Gambella town, who described how 'we have nothing to support ourselves, no one support me in school, no one who could provide me with accommodation', this process was understood in a wholly negative light.<sup>144</sup>

The metaphor of dispersal is deeply rooted in Nuer culture, with Hutchinson explaining how:

whenever the negativity of change is foremost in people's minds, images of increased social separation dominate. One of the most powerful of these metaphors is *ci ro ɔ l dā y* ('the world has split apart, asunder'). When used with reference to a 'marriage' (*kuen*) or other types of 'relationship' (*maar*), the verb *däke* (*däyε*) signifies a permanent rupture—which is to say, a 'divorce' (*dä k kuen*) or a definitive 'severing of kinship' (*dä y maarä*).<sup>145</sup>

<sup>142</sup> For example, Duany, 'Neither palaces nor prisons', 89–100.

<sup>143</sup> Interview with older man, Jikow, April 2019.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with man, Gambella town, March 2019.

<sup>145</sup> Sharon Hutchinson, *Nuer Dilemmas: Coping with Money, War, and the State*, Berkley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996, 40.



There appears, however, to be highly varied views amongst Nuer-speakers on whether this dispersal is fundamentally negative. For example, one Gambella resident described how the more remote parts of the network are just an extension of what already exists locally:

If anything happened in the community there in South Sudan, everyone will be informed, all the headmen, executive chiefs, sub-chiefs will come together to unite and solve the problem in that particular clan, because those who are living in Ethiopia here, because those who are in Ethiopia will worry, they will need to know if what happened has been resolved—this is true also in America.<sup>146</sup>

While every individual has experienced disruption differently, broader trends have emerged. Overall, it is clear there is enormous anxiety about the long-term impact of displacement, although this has manifested itself in various ways according to context.

A key aspect relates to the notion of ‘culture’, specifically the assertion that ‘the Nuer network exists because they have unity on cultural issues’.<sup>147</sup> Exposure to different environments and different cultures, however, creates greater diversity in cultural expression and norms. This is particularly evident in Juba’s PoC sites. When people discuss the differences between themselves and those in Gambella, it is often framed in the context of dancing. For example: ‘The way they dance and the way we dance is sometime different, even the ways we sing our song is also different’.<sup>148</sup> Another resident of the PoC site broadened the point: ‘Back home we have cultural, social and economic ties, but they are now falling apart because of the adaptation of other cultures which may not be good’. While he did not ‘rule out a positive outcome’ from this process, ultimately his view was that the Nuer people would become ‘vulnerable without clear culture in the future’.<sup>149</sup>

A UK resident originally from Gambella who had spent time working for the government in Juba also emphasized this cultural fragmentation, describing the discrimination he had experienced in Juba due to not being able to speak Arabic and being seen as somehow ‘primitive’ by his South Sudanese colleagues.<sup>150</sup>

This fear of losing culture and identity emerges strongly amongst the Nuer diaspora in the UK and Australia, and is particularly the case when older Nuer talk of younger generations that have grown up away from the ‘traditional life’ of the region: ‘There are new generations ... who don’t have this sense of cultural responsibility ... we are trying to inculcate this in our youth but children ... don’t speak Nuer well enough and don’t have this sense of legacy and understanding’.<sup>151</sup>

<sup>146</sup> Interview with man, Gambella town, March 2019.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with man, Gambella town, March 2019.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with Juba PoC resident, Juba, May 2019.

<sup>149</sup> Interview with Juba PoC resident, Juba, May 2019.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with man, UK, January 2019.

<sup>151</sup> FGD with Nuer-speakers, UK, June 2019.

There is particular concern that exposure to images of ‘impoverished Africans’, believed to be prevalent in the Global North, prejudices children’s views of their homeland and relatives.<sup>152</sup> In some cases, this has resulted in parents sending their children to Gambella or South Sudan in order to reconnect with their roots.

## Changing cultural norms

Unsurprisingly, the displacement process leads to changing cultural norms. In Gambella itself, a woman in Jikow described how ‘now, in the world, we are not like in the past’. Being in the refugee camps had created new forms of cooperation amongst women from Maiwut state, regardless of which *cieng* they were part of, in turn influencing how they now worked together.<sup>153</sup>

In Juba, one person described how those in PoC sites have begun focusing on new kinds of business, with, for example, women becoming butchers:

This would be impossible for Nuer men to see Nuer women working as butchers, in contrast with ... the village where they depend on customs and traditional belief that treats women as source of income ... In fact, if we are not displaced the Nuer community will look at such women as irresponsible, criminal or against the Nuer culture.<sup>154</sup>

The key factor in this case has been the loss of support networks due to the death of husbands or brothers. In such situations, women are culturally empowered to take on new roles without the wider support network suffering judgement.

Another individual in the PoC site described how he had argued with his family in Ethiopia about marrying a wife on behalf of his deceased brother, as is traditional, but ‘because of my education and religious experience that changed my attitude, I can’t do that. It was when they realized that I am totally different from them’.<sup>155</sup>

A UK resident described how his brother in the US challenged their father on the number of children he was continuing to father, asking: ‘Do you expect me to support all your kids?’<sup>156</sup> Such an objection, stated so directly from the younger generation to the older, is anathema to traditional norms and should be understood as part of a fundamental reorientation of how kinship networks function. This can be deeply unsettling to those within them.

Norms around dowry and marriage also seem to be adapting to new realities. A growing recent trend has seen men living overseas seeking to arrange marriages with women in

<sup>152</sup> FGD with Nuer-speakers, Melbourne, Australia, June 2019.

<sup>153</sup> Interview with woman, Jikow, March 2019.

<sup>154</sup> FGD with PoC residents in Juba, Juba, June 2019.

<sup>155</sup> Interview with man, Juba, May 2019.

<sup>156</sup> FGD with Nuer-speakers, UK, June 2019.

Gambella or South Sudan, both in person and remotely.<sup>157</sup> Such marriages cause significant complications, particularly if the woman involved is then unable to secure the necessary paperwork allowing her to travel to wherever her husband lives, meaning she must then remarry locally.<sup>158</sup> One interesting feature of such marriages is that, during negotiations, those from overseas are apparently expected to pay a higher dowry and other additional payments. As one rural resident of Gambella described the situation:

The people ... in America, they marry with more things. Our marriage in this area, if there are 15 cows up to 20 the girl could be given ... for America people it is 35 to 40, without other experiences ... because they have properties.<sup>159</sup>

Higher bride-wealth is partly a response to the perception of higher levels of wealth amongst those in the diaspora. In the past, though, it has also been correlated with the strength of connections between different families, with individuals closer to the family they are marrying into having to pay less. That this is happening with those based overseas perhaps indicates an understanding that greater distance contributes to a weakening of connections.

It is in this context that, despite the important support they are able to provide, some of those in the UK and Australia feel it would be 'better' to be closer to home. In Melbourne, for example, members of the Nuer community experience a keen sense of being unable to meet the demands of their family in the region as they would like—sending money alone is felt to be inadequate.<sup>160</sup> This is clearly connected to the fact that all parts of the network are under strain, and demands for support from Gambella and South Sudan are high. In Melbourne, the constant requests for assistance, which cannot always be met, are starting to weaken the relationships between the local Nuer community and their relatives in Gambella and South Sudan. A failure to shoulder one's moral obligation entails judgement from others,<sup>161</sup> with some individuals feeling the pressure of these demands so deeply that they have started to reduce their communication with those in the region.<sup>162</sup> This has the potential to cause long-term disruption to support if it is experienced by enough people for a sufficiently long period.

The fact that these networks rely heavily on money and money transfers may also affect their moral interpretation. Past research has explored the disruption caused to Nuer society over the last two centuries by the arrival of cash, which had a very different set of connotations to cattle, previously used as the primary marker of wealth. In 1982, Hutchinson found communities seeking to keep a distance between people and money, with money earned by doing labour considered unsuitable for purchasing cattle

157 Interview with man in Lare, April 2019.

158 Interview with man, Lare, April 2019.

159 Interview with man, Matar, April 2019. This description was confirmed by three others in Gambella.

160 FGD with Nuer-speakers, Melbourne, Australia, June 2019.

161 FGD with Nuer-speakers, Melbourne, Australia, June 2019.

162 FGD with Nuer-speakers, Melbourne, Australia, June 2019.

for dowries.<sup>163</sup> Some of the language used by respondents for this study suggests such concerns may also underpin anxieties regarding transnational networks, with the young woman in Gambella town who spoke of how the ‘Nuer became bad’ suggesting: ‘I think what affects cooperation could be because of the coming of money, and that leads to an increase in needs, certainly presence of money can affect people’s attitude’.<sup>164</sup>

## Potential risks of division and fragmentation

Respondents in all locations expressed concern about the risks of further fragmentation over time. One UK resident argued that ‘the Nuer are a deeply divided global community now’, which contrasts starkly with the emphasis on unity heard in Gambella itself.<sup>165</sup> There is a strong political component to this, with divisions amongst Nuer political elites echoing through kinship networks. One man provided a Nuer typology based not on area of origin but on relationship with the SPLM-IO. According to one resident of Juba’s PoC site, the Nuer can be divided into the ‘original Nuer’, loyal to the SPLM-IO; the ‘Nuer *waw*’,<sup>166</sup> who are now with the government in Juba; and the ‘lost Nuer’, who have sought to remain neutral and some of whom are in the diaspora.<sup>167</sup>

Such terms are inherently exclusionary, reframing Nuer identity along lines that emphasize division rather than unity. The conflict of recent years, together with the political divisions it has caused, appears to have had effects that have evolved over time. Many describe how the first phase of the war elicited both a strong sense of Nuer solidarity and considerable interest from those in different locations in providing support.<sup>168</sup> However, divisions have emerged with the passing of time and, combined with the increased strain placed across the network, such solidarity has started to fragment. This fragmentation may be a significant driver of the highly emotive language, sometimes crossing into hate speech, used by some South Sudanese diaspora on social media.

Political actors may in turn seek to exploit these divisions. A recent example relating to Gambella is a letter addressed to the international community in 2017 by Thowath Pal, the Chairman of the Ethiopian Unity Patriots Front (EUPF),<sup>169</sup> which sought to undermine Riek Machar’s credibility in South Sudan. The letter used arguments rejected by many

<sup>163</sup> Sharon Hutchinson, ‘The Cattle of Money and the Cattle of Girls among the Nuer, 1930–83’, *American Ethnologist* 19/2 (1992): 294–316.

<sup>164</sup> Interview with a young woman, Gambella town, March 2019.

<sup>165</sup> FGD with Nuer-speakers, UK, June 2019.

<sup>166</sup> A widely-used phrase that means ‘Nuer of money’, implying that their motivations are primarily related to personal enrichment and greed.

<sup>167</sup> Interview with older in man, Juba PoC site, May 2019.

<sup>168</sup> Interviews with men and women, Juba, May 2019; FGD with Nuer-speakers, UK, June 2019.

<sup>169</sup> Thowath Pal is a prominent Ethiopian Nuer politician, having been Governor of Illulabor Province (the predecessor to Gambella) in the 1980s and close to the Derg leader, Mengistu Hailemariam. After the fall of the Derg he went into exile, leading the Ethiopian Unity Patriots Front as a rebel movement against the EPRDF government. He made peace with the government in November 2016 and now resides in Addis Ababa.

in the local area, accusing Riek of exploiting ethnicity to secure support for his agenda, in ways that ‘can trigger geo-political tensions between Ethiopia and her neighboring Sudan and South Sudan’.<sup>170</sup> The evidence provided for this included assertions that more than half the troops taken by Riek to Juba in early 2016 were actually Ethiopians from Gambella; that ‘citizens of the diaspora, who hold dual citizenship of USA, Canada, Australia and European countries with most of them having their land and houses in Gambella regional state as Ethiopians’ were ‘fighting for destruction of South Sudan’; and that the churches were also playing an active role in this.<sup>171</sup> In effect, Thowath Pal sought to reframe the transnational networks and connections described in this report as evidence of a sinister and coordinated purpose. Such politicized framing obscures the reality of everyday transnational experiences and risks both exacerbating growing divisions and encouraging unhelpful policy responses.

Perhaps a more helpful way of understanding the changes these communities are facing is to view them as a form of urbanization. Many Nuer-speaking people who have moved from their rural heartlands have found themselves placed in the quasi-urban environments of camps or been forced to seek livelihoods in diverse towns and cities. Such changes would cause fundamental societal transformation for any group of people, but in this case, rather than taking place within a reasonably coherent geographical entity amongst largely homogeneous peoples, it is occurring across multiple locations in multiple continents with multiple points of cultural reference. This is inevitably a highly complex process, leading to new forms of inequality no longer governed solely by the *cieng*.

At any moment in time, for reasons both structural (such as having better networks across the Ethiopian border) and coincidental (such as suddenly obtaining access to a new transportation opportunity), certain kinship groups are being afforded significant advantages. Nuer in the UK describe their perception that resentment is increasing towards those with wealth in the diaspora, giving as an example the burning of houses in Juba owned by those from overseas.<sup>172</sup>

There are clear tensions between the individualized capitalist system operating in countries of resettlement and the notions of mutual support embedded in Nuer culture, illustrated by stories of businesses led by diaspora individuals struggling on the ground. Hotels founded by those based in the US struggle to make a profit because relatives assume they don’t have to pay. One money transfer business run by two brothers between the UK and Gambella collapsed after the brother in Gambella used all the money to manage and support his personal network on the ground.<sup>173</sup> While

<sup>170</sup> Ethiopian Unity Patriots Front, ‘Press Release: Hidden Truth about Peace in South Sudan in regards to regional security’, 29 September 2017.

<sup>171</sup> Ethiopian Unity Patriots Front, ‘Press Release: Hidden Truth about Peace in South Sudan in regards to regional security’, 29 September 2017.

<sup>172</sup> FGD with Nuer-speakers, Cambridge, UK, June 2019.

<sup>173</sup> FGD with Nuer-speakers, Cambridge, UK, June 2019.

such disputes have always been present, the widely differing cultural contexts in which the system now exists provides individuals with increasingly divergent expectations. Though the networks themselves are clearly partly redistributive in nature they are also self-reinforcing, meaning that these new forms of inequality may become increasingly entrenched.

## Conclusion

This report has touched on what might be called the transnational everyday experience of life in locations significantly affected by displacement and mobility over long periods. Deep and far-reaching networks, present in people's lives on a daily basis, fundamentally affect their life choices. Such choices include where they live and where they can move to; who they live with; and how they support themselves and their families. While different people experience these networks in different ways, particularly across rural and urban locations, everyone is deeply conscious of the impact they are having. Communication and the ability to transfer resources become critical to life in such an environment, with feedback loops identifiable between locations in different parts of the system.

Though these networks are of huge importance, they also represent accelerating changes in cultural identities and norms, which are greatly unsettling to those both in traditionally Nuer and non-Nuer settings. If populations in multiple parts of the system are struggling, this can lead to feelings of negativity, resentment and guilt across all locations. These feelings can then be exploited by political actors looking to sow division.

These transnational networks therefore present a considerable challenge to policy-makers wishing to work with or support these populations. To begin with, they exist outside the nation-state framing most policy processes exist within, and are therefore hard for the policy community to recognize, let alone understand—particularly as many of the mechanisms used are informal. For a national government to engage systematically with networks that exist across Melbourne, Leicester, Addis, Kampala, Gambella, Juba and Akobo is no easy task, requiring a complex mix of organizations and agencies. International organizations that have a presence in multiple countries should in theory find this easier, but the vertical hierarchies used by most of them have meant they have struggled historically to develop coherent cross-border or regional approaches.

If these networks are ignored, then a huge driver of local economic, social and political realities—and potential opportunities to positively enforce them—is missed. Even so, their problematic nature makes them a risky proposition, which is why narratives of diaspora communities fuelling hate speech and division are well entrenched in international circles. There is a danger of overly politicizing networks and seeing them purely through the lens of conflict actors. While there is a clear link to such political dynamics, this approach risks skewing the way networks operate.

## Policy considerations

Anyone involved in externally led interventions in Gambella or similar environments should, at a minimum, take the time to understand how their work will both be impacted



upon and impact this ‘transnational everyday’ experience. If the focus is on livelihood creation or economics, questions should be asked about how external capital is coming into the area and being invested, and what risks or opportunities might be created by changes at key points in common networks. For example, what happens if new job opportunities are created in Juba? Or if the social welfare policies of the local government in Melbourne change?

If the focus is on humanitarian or resilience programming, then actors should seek to understand the transnational strategies being employed by the communities they work with, as well as the key inequalities or shifts they may be contributing to. Actors should also identify any constraints obstructing support, for example in the ability of people to communicate with each other, or to easily transfer resources through the banking system.

If the focus is on peacebuilding, then careful analysis should be conducted of how specific networks—and networked entities such as churches and universities—are contributing to both peace and conflict dynamics. If particular parts of the network are contributing to division, then perhaps there are specific challenges that can be tackled where that part is located.

Responding to such dynamics may require forming more complex teams, which encompass the humanitarian, policy and peacebuilding sectors, with individuals from different locations and different backgrounds involved in the design or implementations of strategies. For example, if the Australian government wishes to develop a truly comprehensive strategy addressing the challenges faced by Melbourne’s Nuer community, it may need to involve not only local authorities and police, but the foreign ministry and its associated partners working in Juba and Gambella. Only then will it be able to understand how the dynamics in these locations are affecting the target community’s lives.

In particular, there should be an acceptance that mobility is a core strategy for survival and growth within these populations, and that any policies or programmes seeking to restrict this mobility have the potential for significant negative effects. This finding is consistent with wider research on migration dynamics in Africa,<sup>174</sup> and should be reflected on by national governments looking to harden borders at home and abroad.

Programmes are often developed on the basis of over-simplified understandings of how and why people move. This is a particular challenge for refugee and return programming, which tends to be premised on relatively straightforward ideas of populations either being forced or choosing to move from point A to point B. This report has demonstrated the complex mix of factors involved, some within people’s control and some not. Analysis of likely population movements, and responses to them, must adapt their models to reflect these realities. This is particularly relevant to the Ethiopian government’s intended reform of its refugee policies and the initiatives it is launching around

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<sup>174</sup> For example, the work of the Migrating Out of Poverty research consortium, available at: [www.migratingoutofpoverty.org](http://www.migratingoutofpoverty.org).

education and job-creation programmes, as well as to ongoing discussions in South Sudan about how best to support returning populations. Such discussions should fully absorb the implications of the networked dynamics set out here.

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