

Food assistance, reintegration and dependency in Southern Sudan

Sarah Bailey and Simon Harragin

Southern Sudan is experiencing an important transformation. Since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, more than two million people have returned to Southern Sudan (or have arrived for the first time). Yet alongside positive developments are serious concerns about political stability. Violence in Abyei in late 2008 and Jonglei in 2009 underscores the fragility of peace and of the gains that have come with it.

Aid agencies – many of whom have been present in Southern Sudan for two decades – have therefore faced a rapidly changing context. On the one hand, there have been hopes of an imminent move from relief assistance to recovery and development. The dominant role that food aid has played in assistance to Southern Sudan is evolving in response to new needs, challenges and opportunities. On the other hand, serious problems remain, including high malnutrition and mortality rates, grossly inadequate infrastructure and basic services, ongoing insecurity and the limited capacity of the government to address these needs. Given the long history of relief assistance in Southern Sudan, fears about dependency also loom large.

This study builds on previous Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) research on reintegration in Southern Sudan to examine three separate and interconnected issues: reintegration, the role of food assistance in supporting reintegration and concerns about dependency

on food aid. It examines the process of reintegration, and the role World Food Programme (WFP) food aid is playing in assisting reintegration. It also explores the concept of dependency, its influence on policy and programming and whether dependency on food aid is influencing the livelihood strategies of returnees and host communities. Overall, it makes the case for WFP to continue supporting reintegration, and doing so in a manner more closely based on the needs and realities of returnees and residents. It also finds that, despite plentiful evidence that food aid has not caused dependency among those receiving it, dependency is still widely perceived to be a problem.

Reintegration¹

The international community and the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) have been heavily preoccupied with logistics of the return process, primarily through supporting the transport of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees to Southern Sudan. However, people returning through these organised channels are the minority – fewer than 13% of all returnees. The overwhelming majority are ‘spontaneous returnees’: those who have organised their own resources and transport. International agencies and the

¹ This study uses the UNHCR definition of reintegration as ‘the achievement of a sustainable return i.e. the ability of returnees to secure the political, economic and social conditions to maintain their life, livelihood and dignity’.

This Synthesis Paper is drawn from a report commissioned by the World Food Programme.



GoSS have begun to turn their attention to the more complex process of the reintegration of returnees. While this attention is a significant step, it cannot be the only one. The lack of strategic support to reintegration has meant that residents are shouldering the heaviest burden of assisting returnees.

Cities and towns are growing. Many returnees choose not to settle in rural areas, a trend that the government is resisting and that aid agencies are struggling to address –or avoiding addressing altogether. The population growth in both urban and rural areas has been accompanied by a deterioration in services, at a time when many humanitarian agencies that had been delivering basic services are reducing their activities and in some cases withdrawing entirely from certain areas. Returnees, often coming back to different livelihood opportunities than they had abroad, face a range of challenges to restarting their lives: saturated markets for unskilled labour, farm land requiring intensive time and labour to clear, a very low level of basic services and limited access to credit, land, and agricultural inputs.

Against this complex backdrop, aid agencies have focused their efforts on providing assistance to meet basic needs, primarily through a ‘reintegration package’ of a three-month food ration, seeds, tools and non-food items. However, assistance upon and after arrival is uneven and uncoordinated – only a handful of IDP returnees interviewed for this study received all components of the ‘reintegration package’. The challenge of identifying and registering spontaneous returnees means that there are delays and legitimate returnees are excluded from this support; the lack of coordination between agencies has further limited potential impacts. There is also a lack of support to returnee livelihoods, a shortfall that is both striking and worrying. For WFP in particular, the need for food interventions supporting reintegration – now and in the future – will depend in no small part on the ability of returnees to establish (or re-establish) meaningful and productive livelihoods.

Food assistance and reintegration

Food aid – specifically the three-month ration distributed as part of the ‘reintegration package’ – has been the most visible and far-reaching form of assistance to returnees. Immediately upon receiving the ration, recipients benefit from a tangible impact on their livelihoods: food aid allows them to pursue important tasks such as building houses, calling in debts and clearing land, without having to worry about where their next meal will come from. Food aid can also be sold, traded and

shared with relatives, all of which are activities that can promote reintegration, even if they are not planned by aid agencies. When returnees share with relatives who remained at home, thereby reducing the burden they place on their families, local coping mechanisms are enhanced.

Food aid can therefore play a role in reintegration, but it is often too little, too late or entirely absent. Returnees and many in aid agencies and government view the three-month duration as insufficient, especially if there is some time to go until the next harvest. The three-month ration alone does not allow people to rebuild viable livelihood alternatives, unless they already have networks and assets of their own in place. The benefits of the food aid are also compromised by under-coverage and unpredictability for spontaneous returnees and, in the case of Northern Bahr el Ghazal, diversion. Because spontaneous returnees must be ‘verified’ to qualify for food assistance – a process that takes up to several months and skips over an uncertain number of returnees – most do not receive the ration immediately upon arrival, and many never receive it at all. The question of what role food aid should play for returnees staying in and around urban centres also remains to be addressed. The exclusive targeting of returnees fails to acknowledge the needs of host communities, which are also facing serious challenges because of the influx of returnees. Food for Recovery has been seen as a potential answer, but its effectiveness is questionable.

Dependency

Dependency is a word that provokes strong emotions and reactions in humanitarian and development actors, particularly where food aid is concerned. A major challenge in discussing dependency and the issue of whether people are dependent on food aid is that ‘dependency’ means different things to different people. In many cases, ‘dependency’ is associated with relief, and food relief in particular. This study uses a two-fold definition of dependency: 1) people receiving food aid are unable to meet basic needs in the absence of external assistance; or 2) food aid undermines the capacity of recipients to meet future needs.

In Southern Sudan, fears of dependency have provided a justification for limiting food aid, usually as part of a broader logic to move away from relief assistance towards interventions focused on recovery and development. Many aid agency and government officials see dependency as a left-over problem from the Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) era. Lower down government hierarchies there is less talk of dependency; instead, there are more requests for WFP to respond to

particular crises that have affected localities in the short term, and to provide assistance to returnees. Despite the wide – and generally unsupported – perception that dependency is a problem, there is no serious discussion of withholding essential emergency assistance in the interest of combating dependency. The discourse is more commonly used as an afterthought to justify decisions made according to political or budgetary constraints – though it does provide subliminal ‘mood music’ that feeds into decision-making, and its importance should thus not be ignored. The fear that continuing to provide free food creates a lazy and lethargic population runs counter to the current programming trend, which aspires to secure people’s passage from relief to sustainable development. It should also be kept in mind that the very people who receive food aid firmly reject the possibility that it may cause them to become dependent.

This study concludes that food aid is not causing dependency in Southern Sudan, not least because it is too little and too unreliable to do so. Aid agencies tend to overestimate the contribution food aid makes to household food consumption; even during OLS, relief assistance contributed less than 5% of household food. That said, food aid does make an important contribution to food security and livelihoods for those who receive it, but it is rarely sufficient to take people through to the next harvest. Recipients use it as part of a broader portfolio of strategies – such as a reliance on kinship, livestock and remittances – the details of which are rarely shared with aid workers, creating the misconception that they are more ‘dependent’ on food aid than is really the case. The persistence of ‘dependency’ as an assumed problem caused by current or past relief assistance points to a worrying disconnect from this reality and a failure to engage with the imaginative ways that people manage their livelihoods. A possible and alarming consequence is that food aid may soon be considered irrelevant and phased out, even where it is still needed.

Supporting reintegration

WFP should place a high priority on continued engagement with processes that support reintegration, including lobbying for support to

livelihoods and promoting understanding of reintegration within WFP. WFP should continue to provide rations to future returnees, but should base the ration on assessed needs as it is apparent that a three-month allocation is arbitrary and often inadequate. WFP should also consider programming in urban areas, and should examine alternative programming that could support reintegration, such as cash transfers. For food assistance to promote reintegration through contributions to food security, livelihoods and social cohesion, WFP must adopt a more rigorous intervention logic than simply restricting assistance to new returnees; the needs of host communities must also be considered. Given four years of targeting food rations to returnees while simultaneously phasing out General Food Distribution activities, WFP can hardly expect to make such a change overnight, but WFP must make a shift in the near future to reintegration programming that more holistically considers the needs of host communities.

The problem of spontaneous returnees being left out of the verification and registration processes is a crucial factor in the under-coverage of food assistance to returnees. While WFP’s participation in the verification process is currently voluntary and falls outside of WFP’s mandate, the agency should promote the efficiency, accuracy and coverage of verification activities if it wishes to improve the coverage, timing and predictability of food aid to returnees.

Although WFP is eager to promote self-sufficiency and make a clean break with OLS-style food aid provision, it must stay focused on vulnerability and supporting livelihoods. This report also presents an opportunity for WFP to promote informed dialogue about concerns that relief tools such as emergency food aid could cause (or are causing) dependency, both within and outside of the organisation. Above all, the fragile peace in Southern Sudan and the Three Areas will continue to face serious challenges in the lead-up to the referendum and beyond, making insecurity one of the biggest threats to reintegration. It is therefore imperative that WFP and other humanitarian agencies maintain the capacity to respond to crises.

