

# Southern Sudan Vulnerability Study

## Published Report

USAID have funded a study on vulnerability in southern Sudan. This largely anthropological study was carried out between May 1997 and June 1998 and is intended for the use of humanitarian aid workers. The final report describes the political, kinship, religious and economic structures amongst the Dinka, before going on to look at the welfare structure, the circumstances surrounding vulnerability, and possible ways of addressing that vulnerability in welfare interventions. It ends with case study examples of the situation on the ground (from the Paliaw area of north Bor and the Thiek Thou area of northern Bahr el Ghazal) and concludes with a section on the implications of the research for better relief interventions.

The researcher spent eleven months collecting data across the seasonal calendar and acquiring fluency in Dinka language. The methodology involved 'observing rather than disturbing' with much information gleaned from being present at court cases and local discussions, as an observer rather than part of the discussion or an active question-asker. The main findings of the study were as follows.

Vulnerable individuals are defined in Dinka terms as those without an adequate kinship structure to protect them. Within the kinship system the unit that is most significant is the 'mac thok' meaning the extended family or specifically those who share in the bridewealth contributions for the marriage of a daughter. In this unit there is unquestioning sharing of resources but there are also obligations to the wider lineage group and to a much lesser extent to the unit (wut) that occupies a piece of territory and grazes cattle together. Understanding that there are groups among whom sharing is expected and groups between whom competition for resources is also expected, is fundamental when it comes to planning for equity in relief distributions.

Most distributions in the south take place at payam level (the administrative level below the county) through the wut chiefs. A chief at the lowest level only has authority as a senior member of a group of related people - his lineage. This is the level at which a chief is more accountable. Higher up the order of seniority, a chief must represent (as a member of court and as a distributor of relief items) a group of unrelated people who share common grazing rights and forms of alliances by marriage. Aid agencies can choose the appropriate chief to represent different groups of people if they have a knowledge of the different degrees of loyalty and impartiality he is expected to show these groups.

The study found that in the past, targeting aid to the vulnerable reflected mainly the logistical and financial constraints of the relief operation in the south. This has been a 'sham', according to the study, as in most cases, where locals accepted the conditions outsiders put on the relief, they subsequently redistributed it to all sections of the population who then redistributed it within their lineages to those who were most in need. The researcher found that at a higher level in the community, it was strongly felt that aid should be distributed to all lineages in the area fairly (according to their numbers rather than their absolute need), so that they can then each take part in the socially important practice of giving to their own weak members - a process that strengthens the whole welfare structure that people must rely upon when there is no relief.

The author concluded, "that local people should be allowed to target relief, rather than targeting being dictated by the international community", and that this conclusion is arrived at for pragmatic reasons. First, local people will redistribute relief whether we like it or not. One must therefore trust local people to care for their own vulnerable as well as understanding what behaviour the local culture expects vis a vis sharing. Second, the kinds of people who are seen as vulnerable in Dinka society, for example those who do not have a large immediate family such as a childless widow or a man who has no sisters to bring in cows for his marriage, are very difficult for someone not from the community to identify. There are no easily defined social categories of vulnerable people in the south, only certain counties and payams that are more in need than others. The report concludes that prioritisation by area should be undertaken by 'neutral' outsiders on a needs basis, while internal targeting should be (and is in any case) carried out within the groups that define themselves as 'communities'.

*Ref: The Southern Sudan Vulnerability Study , Simon Harrigan Chol Changath Chol, Published by SCF (UK) South Sudan Programme PO Box 48700 Nairobi Kenya. June 98*

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Taken from Field Exchange Issue 6, February 1999

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