

## Class, cash and control in the South Sudan and Darfur borderlands

Nicki Kindersley & Joseph Diing Majok Majok

To cite this article: Nicki Kindersley & Joseph Diing Majok Majok (2022): Class, cash and control in the South Sudan and Darfur borderlands, Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal, DOI: [10.1080/23802014.2022.2095429](https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2022.2095429)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2022.2095429>



Published online: 31 Jul 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 6





View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## Class, cash and control in the South Sudan and Darfur borderlands

Nicki Kindersley <sup>a</sup> and Joseph Diing Majok Majok <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of History, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK; <sup>b</sup>Rift Valley Institute, South Sudan and Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh University, Scotland, UK

### ABSTRACT

This article argues for a better understanding of the market foundations of 'elite' autocracy, and for a re-centring of the construction and exploitation of labour markets, in histories of economic and political power in South Sudan. Based on conversations with residents and migrant workers on the borders between north-western South Sudan and southern Darfur in Sudan over 2017 to 2019, it explores how cycles of wars, displacement, resettlement and reconstruction since the 1980s have rapidly monetised and commodified working lives, land and relationships. This has precipitated rapid class stratification, cash debt and worker exploitation, and sharp controls on the emerging cheap cash labour pool via border violence, wage depression, land alienation and rents, and the construction of a private educational market, which have all undercut older forms of collective work and mutuality. These changes have been encouraged and exploited by growing classes of private landowners, commercial farmers and military entrepreneurs, and been supported by the development and humanitarian system's investment in market forces and individual self-reliance.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 26 August 2021  
Accepted 23 June 2022

### KEYWORDS

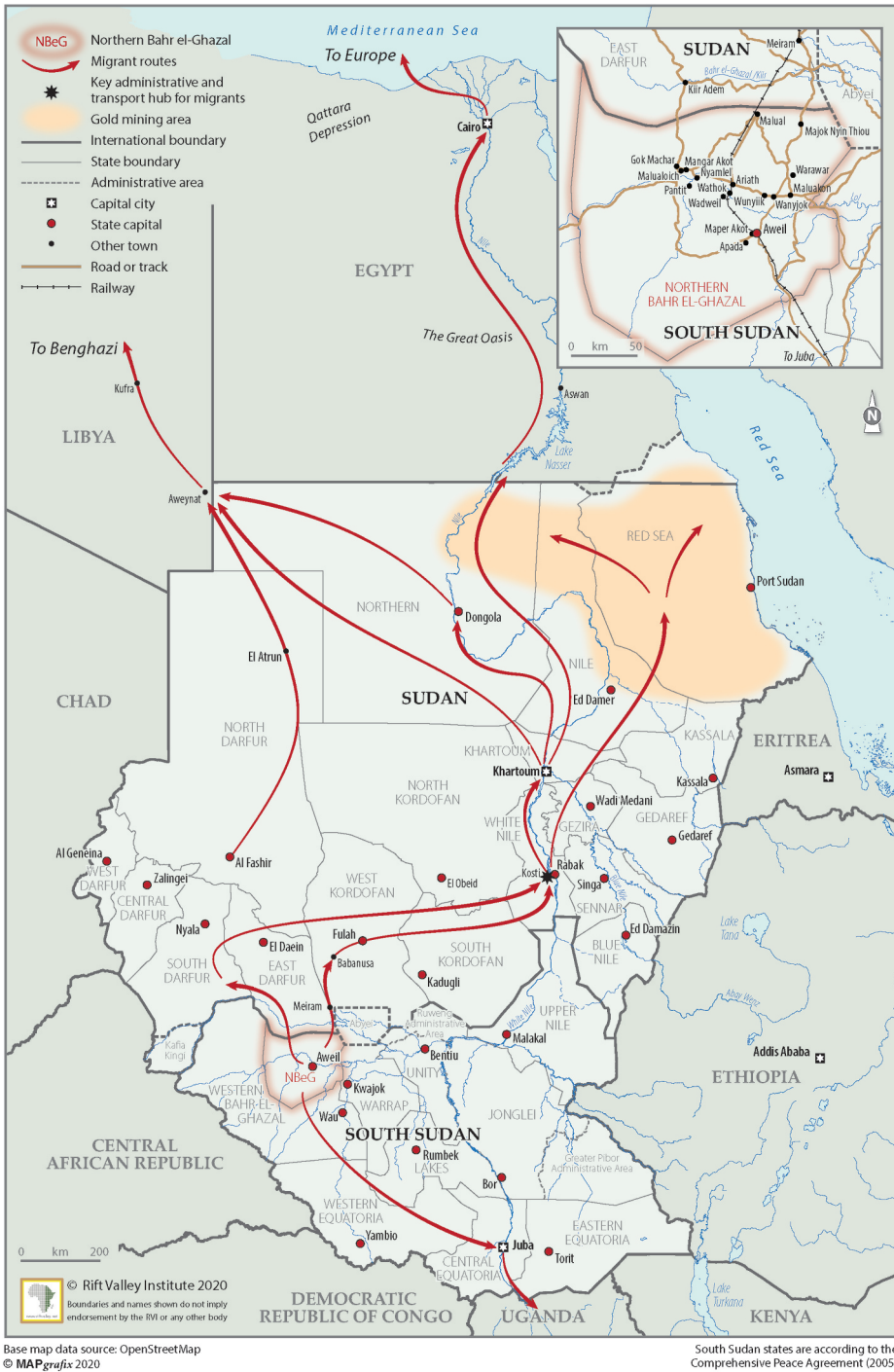
Sudan  
South Sudan  
livelihoods  
neoliberal  
labour  
migration

## Introduction

In early 2019, Diang Slog, a young artist and performer from the rural area of Majak Baai on the border between South Sudan and southern Darfur in Sudan, wrote a song called 'Struggle for a better life'. Sung in the local dialect of Dinka, the lyrics go:

I tried everywhere and life is still painful,  
I tried places which appeared to be better – but life is still hot and hot.  
Even if I run to town, there's still no quick change  
What is this terrible situation, my people?  
I am struggling very hard after a better life,  
But my life can never improve economically.<sup>1</sup>

Diang's song articulates the frustration and stress of most working-age men and women in this borderland, whose families have navigated the last 40 years of brutal conflicts, displacement, mass resettlement and repeated reconstruction. These multiple shocks have rapidly and fundamentally changed a regional political economy that has, for



**Figure 1.** Common migrant routes from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan, 2020. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Rift Valley Institute and MAPGrafix.

most people, become deeply exploitative, driving many people into debt and insecure paid labour in markets and private farms. This article takes up Diang's central question: what is this terrible situation? How have this borderland's economy and labour market been transformed, and how has this transformation constructed the forms of exploitation and economic entrapment Diang describes in his song?

This is a study of how rapid agricultural and market transition and the creation of a paid labour economy have been precipitated through repeated conflict, military mobilisation, displacement and reconstruction since the 1980s. This transition has created class stratification and individual accumulation, and new private-property and cash-rich classes have invested in exploiting marketisation and a cheap workforce via manipulating laws and controls on land and labour. This article aims to understand this from the perspective of the underpaid and impoverished workers speaking (and spoken to) in Diang Slog's song, from hundreds of interviews about people's working lives.

### *Histories of imperialism, market capitalism and neoliberalism*

Despite significant changes since the 1850s in authority, technology, population, institutions and geography, power in this region has always been rooted in personalised authority based on local monopolies of wealth, control and military force, alongside its projection of distant state power. Northern Bahr el Ghazal's incorporation into global political economies since at least the 1800s has generally been on what many might describe as neoliberal terms (Lebaron and Ayers 2013, 879), as armed powers have attempted to monopolise and extract wealth from the region through exerting controls on residents' labour and resources for external markets, and racialising and commodifying life and labour. Generations of armed authorities have worked to entrap residents as impoverished and disposable workers, breaking systems of mutual aid and common lands (Sikainga 2000; Johnson 1988).

Many common definitions or periodisations of a global neoliberal political economy do not hold up well in this context (following Szeman 2015, 483; Abourahme 2018, 109). Colonial or postcolonial states have never really structured and managed market forces in northern Bahr el Ghazal, or provided services to dismantle. The key change in the last 40 years of northern Bahr el Ghazal's political economy is not the relationship between state and market but instead an advance of the capitalist frontier via imposition of rents through enclosure and the commodification of assets (Thomas 2019). The expansion of capitalism via the colonising processes of enclosing and commodifying resources, lands, work and people is increasingly well documented in Africa, partly because these processes are not complete and so the boundaries of the definition of property are still hard-fought (See Larmer 2017, 182).

This study details the contemporary history of these processes in Northern Bahr el Ghazal as an example of uneven but rapid forms of proletarianisation and accumulation through dispossession (Edwards, Hill, and Neves-Sarriegui 2020, 30). It sits within a wave of research on the impacts and processes of marketisation and cash labour economies, including critical studies of microfinance and school fee debts (Green and Estes 2019; Vokes and Mills 2015), gendered cash labour systems (Munive 2014; Leonard 2019; Majok 2019), and land enclosure and commodification, and its impacts on class stratification (Greco 2015; Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr 2017). Like a new wave of literature in

contemporary Africa and Asia, we draw a distinction between always-precarious family farming and pastoralist livelihoods, and developing forms of individualised cash labour and land rental (Kusakabe and Myae 2019, 524; Rosario and Rigg 2019, 520; Brass 2015, 532). These market systems create additional forms of risk and insecurity, often on very short timescales of debt and need, as families buy food and owe interest on a weekly or daily basis.

In South Sudan, this transition has been poorly documented and explored. Despite a large literature on the end of the second civil war in 2005 and independence in 2011, there is actually comparatively little economic history of the ‘post-conflict reconstruction’. This gap is obscured by the extensive studies of livelihoods, aid and relief, subsistence and ‘resilience’ – mostly funded by international donor and humanitarian agencies – which rarely (ever) take up a class and power analysis. This work also rarely links local livelihoods with economic systems of military recruitment. This is in part because the neoliberal development apparatus that has produced this research, despite its language of rights and freedoms, has fundamentally supported the marketisation of South Sudan’s local economies and the exploitative structures of local labour markets. For aid and development systems that are driven by specifically Western neoliberal ideologies, independent entrepreneurship within market economies is a key path out of poverty (Young 2014, 46). At the same time, the aid and development industry in South Sudan, including the UN’s infrastructure, international aid agencies and other dollar-paid para-industries like car and compound rentals, have since the 1990s helped to produce the new South Sudanese middle classes who can invest in and profit from the commodification of farmland and urban rental markets and the proliferation of desperate and cheap workers (L. B. Deng 2010; D’Agoût 2018; Thomas 2017).

### ***Class formation and the elites in South Sudan***

Research on South Sudan’s internal economic relations and class stratification is still very limited. Where class analysis arises, it generally focuses on ‘the elites’, and uses the language of markets, accumulation and purchase (of loyalty and power) often relatively unreflectively. Recent scholarship has created a series of punchy descriptives of this South Sudanese ‘gun class’ of a ‘degenerative gun-toting aristocracy’ (D’Agoût 2018; Pinaud 2014; Theron 2020; Jok 2021; de Waal 2014; Thiong 2018). Clémence Pinaud (2021, 205–6, 213–14) differentiates this class from a ‘lower stratus’ of ‘intermediaries, or middle-class of indebted followers’ bought into this hierarchy through marriage, gifts and patronage.

However, this history of class stratification is under-researched and analyses remain under-developed. Majok D’Agoût (2018) has set out key drivers of modern social mobility and class formation, a feedback loop of ‘guns, wealth, religion, education, and tribe’, rooted in the history of power struggles between government-appointed chiefly families, a professionalised business and administrative *effendiya* class, and military veterans over the 1960s and 1970s. But there is still very little research into this wider regional and ethnic educational and class history beyond the evolution of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) military leadership. Because most of this ‘elite’ research is driven towards understanding ‘the political calculus of the SPLM leaders ... based on elite factors: their own resources and interests’ (de Waal 2014, 364), most analyses focus on the economic and political management and self-maintenance of

these elites, from the top down, exploring internal fights and relationships or how patronage is dispensed. There is very little work so far on the local economic histories and foundations of this military-political elite beyond competition over military control, central state oil rents and contracts, or how their military and economic power rests on local labour and land resources. A few scholars have begun to explore the local negotiations over political authority and the moral limits to violence that structure relations between this aristocracy and their 'lower classes' (quoting Pinaud 2016, 246; see Pendle 2020; Stringham and Forney 2017).

A fuller exploration of recent class stratification and power relations needs to connect with recent scholarship on South Sudan's market transition and the commodification and enclosure of land (Thomas 2019; Badiey 2013; D. K. Deng 2019), because the 'political marketplace' of elites and patronage politics rests on this marketisation process and the formation of a paid working class. These elites are not just the men, and a very few women, who managed to gain wealth and decision-making power within the military systems of the rebel SPLM/A. Since the 1980s, class stratification and concentrations of family wealth have formed through employment in aid agencies and the UN, and latterly within the civil and military services of the independent South Sudan and Sudan states. Since peace in 2005, these people have been in the position to make decisions over land rights and allocations, markets and border controls, welfare and aid, and access to the education and waged jobs that are the escape routes from grinding jobbing labour and farm work. They have also been able to invest their new cash-based wealth in commercial farming, private schools and market businesses opened up by their restructuring of the land, labour, and trade markets. Since 2012, throughout a sustained national economic crisis and high inflation, wealthy individuals – locally famous as senior UN staff, military commanders, diaspora investors, wives of politicians, and so on – have consolidated small or large local monopolies by buying up and enclosing productive areas of farmland, profiting from an increasingly desperate workforce willing to be paid at depreciated rates.

This forces our research back towards old agrarian questions of labour and capital to understand how South Sudan's political economy has evolved to produce this class stratification and sharp hierarchies of power and exploitation. Our study follows a wave of new case studies on farmland dispossession, land rents and rural debts (Oya 2013, 1551; Nyantakyi-Frimpong and Bezner Kerr 2017, 430). It builds on new research into agrarian capitalism by briefly exploring the local promulgation of ideas of power and aspiration within the processes of marketisation and privatisation.

This article proposes that what is new in this political economy in the last 40 years is, firstly, the near-comprehensive capturing of the region's population into financialised, marketised insecurity and dependence, straining and breaking systems of reciprocity (following Harvey 2005; Green and Estes 2019, 130–31); and, secondly, the inculcation of neoliberal capitalist realism – that no other economic life is possible beyond individual self-promotion within the market oligopoly. What is different to the 1970s, older residents emphasise, is money's capture of all aspects of life, including water, seeds, land, and – with school fees – relationships between parents and children, and the increasing difficulty of 'surviving outside' of money and markets (Genevieve and Ayers 2013, 882). This capture extends to mental life and personal ambition, to shape and discipline the

individual into the resignation that this is the way things are (Fisher and Gilbert 2013, 90). And as Diang Slog notes, 'even if I run', there are few places now where this economy is any different.

This study starts by exploring the reconfiguration of the Northern Bahr el Ghazal economy since the 1980s, reflecting on dynamics since the 1800s. It then summarises the processes of enclosure and privatisation, the rise of the rural wage economy, and the individualisation of rents and debts. The third section explores the growth of class stratification and efforts to control cheap labour within this transforming economy. The final section details these controls in the military labour market, and how residents set these dynamics within a wider analysis of an international political economy.

### *Methodology: working lives, songs and poetry*

The article is based on around 200 interviews with people living in Northern Bahr el Ghazal and on the routes out of this region southwards to the capital of Juba, northwards into Sudan, and onwards to Egypt and Libya (see [Figure 1](#)).<sup>2</sup> Over 2018–2019, with Marko Dut Garang in Aweil and Juba, Santino Garang Akot, Paulino Dhieu Tem and Asunta Abuk Deng in Aweil, and Samuel Nicola Kornelio in Khartoum, we met with tea ladies, market and long-distance traders, day labourers and farm workers, charcoal sellers, seasonal agricultural workers and bricklayers, soldiers, ex-militiamen, police and security agents, students, and elderly men and women on farms and in homes.<sup>3</sup> The accounts presented here are roughly representative of our conversations over the last three years.

These oral histories are a key resource for the otherwise-marginalised perspectives of workers and migrants (French 2019; Mazurana 2013). Often in circumstances of war and post-war reconstruction, interviews can be structured around narratives of conflict and displacement, and this can mean that the details of quotidian getting-by are overlooked. Here, we follow Jane Guyer's call (2016) for historically grounded studies of economic architectures: how economic life works as people see and understand it. We asked specifically about how families have hunted for work and school fees, about savings and investments, and how this economy of money, exchange and trust has shifted. Throughout our research, we listened out for songs, poems, sayings and terms that came up in conversation or during travel. Some of these are presented here as a way of attempting to integrate a wider world of political culture and discourse. We believe that in a landscape with limited use of social media, few to no newspapers, and a tightly monitored radio network, this broad cultural circuit of songs, jokes and phrases is a key arena for contemporary political thought (Karekwaivanane 2019; Callaci 2017). By using these sources of theory and analysis here, this article aims to demonstrate the possibilities of breaking down the lines between 'aesthetics, economics and politics' (Rubin, Fioratta, and Paller 2019, 429), to better see how people live within, explain and imagine worlds of work.

The research projects that this article is based on are part of a group of studies on north-east African borderland political economies led by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) in partnership with regional universities and research centres.<sup>4</sup> With the RVI and as co-leaders of the project, we worked to ensure fair wages, transparent budgets, proper health care for our team, and the collective discussion of ideas, analyses and work plans.<sup>5</sup> We explicitly recognised and tried to work against the imbalances of access to literature and time to read, and the racial hierarchies and power structures of the funding and the project. Most of

the research team are part of the community written about here, and we wanted to write a history emerging from sympathy and respect. We discussed the project's analyses, presented here and elsewhere, with the people we interviewed, and with people we sat with in restaurants and drank coffee with at breakfast. This project is part of a wider and ongoing conversation about ethical historical and political research in South Sudan.

## Contemporary histories of exploitation in the Northern Bahr el Ghazal borderland

Farm and market workers across Northern Bahr el Ghazal often explain their immediate economic stress within much longer histories of exploitation. The region was drawn into imperial states' economic networks from northern and central-east Africa from the 1850s onwards, as the frontier of raiding and hunting paths from strings of fortified trading posts at Gotung, Moro and Telgona, often providing shelter for refugees (Majak Koejok 1990, 96–107; Jędrej 2000, 284). Relationships with remote armed powers continued in roughly similar patterns through the Mahdist and then British colonial governments in Khartoum. Demands for cash, cattle taxes and labour were frequently evaded through resistance and distance, in remote self-sufficient homesteads away from trade routes and urban centres (Majak Koejok 1990, 108–9, 210–13).

The region's contemporary marketisation has roots in the British administration's attempt to force an economic transition to labour taxation and agricultural and commercial livestock production, which marked the practical start of imperial rule in Northern Bahr el Ghazal. The Malual Dinka uprising against these demands, led by the diviner Arianhdit, was defeated in 1922 (Majak Koejok 1990, 4–5, 11–13). Six years later, British authorities in Aweil abolished taxation in kind and introduced cash tax to force monetisation (Majak Koejok 1990, 309–12). But this did not generally create a transition away from family self-production based on mutual responsibility and collective rights. Money was not really used for day-to-day food and shelter until after the 1950s, and this only partially shifted with the lifting of travel restrictions on southern districts at Sudanese national independence in 1956. Young men (and some women) began to seasonally dip into northern Sudan's markets and commercial farming economies to make quick cash for marriage bridewealth and imported clothes and bicycles. But well into the 1960s, residents still considered cash work and trading a job for poor people, thieves, and the homeless (Majak Koejok 1990, 312). The majority of working men and women invested their time in a combination of agriculture and cattle keeping, for domestic use and some cash trade. It was only really in recent memory – by the late 1970s and early 1980s – that residents remember facing down an expanding cash economy frontier, needing money for border charges and all taxes, imported drugs and goods.

This expanding cash frontier came with the civil wars and displacements of the 1980s. In 1980 Baggara Misseriya and Rizeigat raiding parties from across the Darfur borderlands began to move southwards to seize food and cattle, precipitated by severe local drought and destitution (Mawson 1991; Majak Koejok 1989). The Sudan Government fuelled these murahaleen militias as a cheap famine-management system and a convenient method of co-opting local authorities in southern Darfur against local militias in northern Bahr el Ghazal organising against these raids (Kindersley 2018). By February 1986, around half a million people were displaced, with family homes, farm investments and savings



destroyed, forcing refugees into paid or indentured labour on the margins of towns, commercial farms and displaced settlements across northeast Africa (Duffield 2002; African Rights 1995).

### *Economic transformations via dispossession and repossession, 1990-2012*

By the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of residents had fled mostly into Sudan and had reconstructed some security and family life based on cash work in towns and on farms, including indentured or bonded agricultural work on rented and borrowed farmland. This built new family economies based significantly on women's money-generating power and on cash-in-hand work (Akuany 1991, 70; Awan Yath 1993). Cash work included military employment: men fleeing the raids with their families were often coercively recruited in Darfur or Sudan, by the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) or allied militias, or signed themselves up for work through the war.

At the same time in northern Bahr el Ghazal, raiding parties assisted and supplied by the SAF continued brutal raiding, abductions and looting. This destroyed farms and villages near to the government-controlled town, the train line and military convoy routes. Farms turned back into roor, wild lands, destroying generations of work and soil investments. Thousands of local men and women organised into defence groups and joined the emergent rebel SPLA.<sup>6</sup> By the start of the 1990s, the local SPLA had gained control of most rural areas, particularly in eastern areas around Wadweil village, away from government towns and the train line. By the mid-1990s, the SPLA military administration organised its own raids, road taxes, markets, conscription and taxation,<sup>7</sup> creating new classes of wealthy military commanders who controlled these financial systems (Nyaba 2002; Kindersley 2018).

Viewing the civil war in retrospect gives a foreshortening effect. Many families lived and worked in refuge in Sudan and elsewhere for twenty years, and the SPLA's military economy had evolved over at least ten years by the time of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The peace deal did not deconstruct the wartime economic systems of the now-ruling SPLA and its SPLM political wing. Instead, peacetime southern regional government was built in the same garrison towns and key market sites, and employing the same administrators (Garang and Kuol 2013). The precipitous post-war reconstruction of villages and markets was built on top of this wartime economic geography.

With peace, people were encouraged to return 'home' partly by the political pressure of losing homes and legal rights in Sudan and elsewhere. By 2012, about half a million former residents and first-time second-generation families moved into the region, an area of about 30,000 square kilometres, doubling the area's population (Meier 2013). This reconstruction work placed huge pressures on generally poor returnees' savings and physical energies, as families worked to break open wild lands for farming.<sup>8</sup> Definitions of property and relationships to cash had significantly changed since the pre-war years (see Thomas 2019, 2013). Many men and women relied on waged or cash-based market work in displacement, and urgently needed regular cash income to re-establish safe homes, schooling and healthcare for their families. As the region's population doubled, people relied on imports of cheap food, drugs and homewares from across the Sudan border. This tied residents more closely to the cash economy.

For the few (maybe thousands) of people who had done well out of the war and who had money to invest, the reconstruction of local government and the economy was an opportunity to accumulate and invest profits from their access to new state salaries, control of checkpoints and aid allocations, management of taxation systems, access to government contracts and work with UN and INGO agencies that paid in US dollars. The local government's formalisation of land tenure and sale, particularly in and around towns and in rich-soil farmlands, and the ability to make formal legal claims to old clan lands, provided opportunities for cash-rich residents to enclose and privatise land (Newhouse 2017). These investors also now had a cheap pool of returnee paid labour.

For most of the regions' residents, though, this reconstruction and its concomitant institutionalisation of land property rights and taxations created stress and insecurity. Even people who survived the war within SPLA-held territories, retaining their farms and herds, were increasingly affected by global market prices of peanuts, hibiscus, fuel, and gum arabic, as well as by changing climactic conditions (Kindersley and Diing Majok 2019, 12). Emergency food aid programmes had to restart after 2008 as families struggled to feed themselves (Maxwell et al. 2017, 27).

As we discussed this recent history, most men and women emphasised how much worse life had become since the wars of the 1980s, and their sense of loss, moral degradation and deep collective impoverishment. Of course it is possible that these reflections are essentially nostalgic in today's context of everyday stress and hardship. But these workers' explanations are specific about how cycles of destruction and reconstruction have sped up the processes that have made things so bad: the growing domination of markets and cash that encouraged the more affluent to exploit their extended kin and poor neighbours for cheap labour.

## The shifting economy of reconstructed South Sudan, 2005-2013

### *Enclosure, rents and wages*

Reconstruction from 2005 precipitated a wave of land surveying and private cash sales of land. The SPLM local government organised the enclosure and commodification of large areas of particularly peri-urban land, where returning families sought to settle close enough to medical and education services. Courts also adjudicated family claims to traditional clan farmlands, creating new ownership paperwork and demarcating private farms. This process of private enclosure sped up the already changing ideas of land as personal property (Justin and van Dik 2017; Badiey 2013).

Land enclosure and privatisation came in waves. After the national economic crisis began in mid-2012 there was a further expansion of enclosure, as wealthy residents bought up large swathes of the best agricultural land from families struggling with rapid inflation of education and health costs, or who were moving to urban areas due to economic pressure. For many buyers, these purchases were not necessarily for their own large-scale farms (as after 2005) but for rental back to local residents. Some post-war returnee residents began to be evicted from the free plots of unallocated land donated to them in the immediate post-peace resettlement by clans and families who had older claims on the area, who by the 2010s saw the financial potential of reclaiming their property from 'squatters'. This occurred particularly where these resettlement sites were

on rich farmland or near towns, and therefore where the potential cash value was high. Many men and women now rent farmland from private landowners in these valuable areas.

This is an expanding frontier of privatisation and marketisation, as noted by Peter, a farmer and ex-refugee in Darfur. He explained how land sales

have turned us to be IDPs [internally displaced persons] in our own region – now that we returned to our country, we found [the system that] we left behind in [Sudan]. In our culture, you sold only houses, and not land.<sup>9</sup>

As Peter describes, post-war reconstruction included the reconfiguration of what constitutes commodifiable wealth. This is also changing the financial security of farmers working areas that are not demarcated and therefore still collectively-owned. Manyang, a young man living in a rural village near the town of Warawar, emphasised how crops grown on supposedly traditional family or communal lands are now not secure in the same way as the pre-war period, 'unless you have your own money to buy the farmland and then take it to be registered, and then you would own it for good.'<sup>10</sup>

Land enclosure and commodification is part of the wider processes that have pushed most of the region's population into market dependence and a growing debt economy (Thomas 2019). Many residents now either combine their own small private farming with cash-in-hand work, or rely entirely on agricultural work for cash. In 2019, the work of planting out or harvesting an area of 15 by 10 feet was paid at 3000 South Sudanese Pounds (SSP) each (about \$10). A physically healthy worker might make \$2-\$5 a day, about enough to pay for family food, and potentially for school fees (if there are other workers in the house).<sup>11</sup> Reliance on waged work leaves these residents similarly reliant on markets to then buy their own food, particularly in dry seasons where their own produce from household crops has run out. Weekly food budgets therefore depend on fluctuating market prices and import costs, with frequent border closures and flooding creating sudden spikes in food and drug prices. But with a surplus of very poor local workers, market rates remain conveniently low for employers. The wage levels above were set in 2016, and significant inflation-led increases in food market prices have not been met by wage rises. Over the last four years, workers have had to double their hours on cash-in-hand work to keep families fed and healthy, leaving less time for other investments, particularly if they are now living in rented houses or on rented land. As migrant labourer Wol explained, 'nowadays money becomes everything. There are people from middle class families now who have no ability to get more than food for their daily consumption.'<sup>12</sup>

For women and men working in markets, their small businesses or daily paid jobs depend on managing multiple short-term loans with steep interest, sometimes at rates of 50% per day depending on the lender. Regina, married to a soldier missing in action in 2018 and with three children under eight, explained:

my job in the market is tea making. [I] go to the shop to borrow a half-kilo of sugar, a bit of charcoal with 70SSP and a jerry can of water with 20SSP, and then sit down to make tea. ... I am renting the tea equipment from a woman who used to make tea but has stopped ... So I work, and then pay her a daily rate for this tea box and the chairs. Now in the evening I pay back the owner of this shelter I am operating in, and the owner of the tea equipment. The rent for the shelter is 150SSP, and the tea equipment is 100SSP a day.<sup>13</sup>

These daily rents and rates create intense daily insecurity, with workers increasingly dependent on finding, physically doing, and actually being paid for cash work (from business or farm owners who sometimes dispute pay or pay at the end of a season), or making enough to pay back sometimes-daily loans and rents, like Regina's tea business. This creates a double time horizon for poor workers here, of apparently unbreakable bondage at the same time as a daily survivalist urgency (see Mavelli 2018). Songs and poems in circulation during our research often emphasised how this economic transition is stripping people of their abilities to plan and progress, as one of Winnie Joanne's poems explains:

Even your dreams are constantly interrupted  
 By thousands of alarms before dawn  
 Wishes are all you can afford.<sup>14</sup>

### *The collapse of collective work*

Daily market dependence has significantly undercut residents' ability to collectively share their labour, spare time, and lend money. Most people now work purely on *ajar*, cash labour on fields; or through sharecropping (*nuz*) in exchange for tea, sugar and food to keep the workers going during cultivation, and a cut of the crop or profit at the end of the season. In the last ten years or so, most people have stopped organising *nafir*, an older pre-1980s form of shared communal labour on neighbourhood farms, which requires time and spare resources (for food, water and beer) – despite this large collective work pool being critically important for breaking open new farmland. This mutual aid system has broken down within even relatively close families and neighbourhoods: many relatives and next-door neighbours now cannot afford (and will not accept) to work on each other's farms without being paid cash. Angelina and Ngor, farm workers in Alel, explained that 'communal labour is no longer possible now. People don't accept free work at all. They only need to work and get paid.'<sup>15</sup>

Martha, farming on the outskirts of Maper village, is in her seventies and traced the history of these changes since the early 2000s. 'It was possible because – that time – there was enough for the people, and you could help your neighbour when you know that you have food in your house. But now no one has food in their house, and you will not accept to go and work without pay when your children don't have food to eat.'<sup>16</sup> Here Martha describes a process of sharpening economic inequalities between households: fewer families have the financial security of farm and cattle wealth than before the war, and with the collapse of civil service pay with the national economic crisis, only a very small number of individuals have access to wages higher than poverty levels. As Athian, a farmer in Ariath, explained, 'there are many people that are dependent on the few.'<sup>17</sup> Martha also noted that collective attempts to challenge poverty wages for the majority – by demanding higher rates from commercial farm-owners, for example, through bargaining or strikes – was too risky to contemplate in circumstances where most families are kept afloat on tiny daily incomes, and the owners of farms are generally linked to the local and national political and military apparatus.

The loss of collective work (*nafir*), monetisation and sharp class stratification even within close kin networks are all straining wider systems of social security. In these circumstances, mutual aid and extended familial support becomes difficult, with many people focused on their immediate families.<sup>18</sup> Local neighbourhood, church, and marketplace collective saving funds (called *sandouks*, boxes) are built on trust drawn from friendships, families, and shared

moral norms, but they also depend on material resources (see also Kim et al. 2020; Rockenbauch and Sakdapolrak 2017). The cash commodification of labour, time and resources has quantified and abstracted these relationships of debt and mutuality. Angelina, Ngor, Martha and Athian highlight this recent shift away from these forms of mutual debt and care obligations towards fully financialised loans with interest, and the increasing inability of many people to loan their energy, time and scarce financial and food resources since the 2010s in particular. These developments have worked to unlink ‘good debts’ that keep people connected and caring for each other.<sup>19</sup> Mutual loans of physical work, shared childcare, tea and sugar, charcoal and cash create communal solidarity. These debts act as forms of care for those in need, as Yual, a farmer at the remote rural area of Chamanguei, emphasised –

when you learnt that your neighbour’s kids spent a night without food, you would help even if you only have tea. You can also lend your neighbour a sack of charcoal to sell if any of his kid is sick, and he will give it back when he’s burnt [i.e. made] his charcoal – because we don’t have money to lend each other, as we don’t save money.<sup>20</sup>

With fewer residents able to safely engage in mutual loans and generosity, Athian emphasised his concern about the increasing sense of dependency and charity between relatives and friends, instead of mutuality (following Jedrej 1983, 556; Graeber 2012, 232–33). Ayak Chol’s poem ‘for the love of the land’ also articulates this:

These ties assumed commensal is in truth parasitic  
Dare I think of giving?

This process of turning mutuality into individual debt has been aided by the liberal development sector, which has implemented agricultural development projects and endorsed humanitarian assistance models based on the logics of ‘self-help’, individual resilience and entrepreneurship. In Northern Bahr el Ghazal, some residents noted that people have justified cutting off financial support or aid for family and friends using this language. Changing forms of debt have generally been overlooked in South Sudan’s political economy literature, however. Most research and analysis has focused on shifting systems of transactional capital: how large rents (from oil, water and other resources) are bargained over by a small rentier and aristocratic class in what Alex de Waal (2019, 27) has summarised as the political marketplace. This language will need to be unpicked to capture the shifting forms of capital and debt among the region’s majority of residents.

Residents in Northern Bahr el Ghazal are working to consciously resist these processes. In the Aweil suburb of Maper village, for example, a group of men and women are trying to counteract societal atomisation and the impetus towards either constant work or flight across the border by hosting community dances and drum meetings, singing songs sung during nafir work and old celebrations. Athian emphasised that people continue to stretch themselves financially to look after each other: ‘if it is generosity that destroyed my wealth, I think it would destroy it again, if I get more money again.’<sup>21</sup>

## **Class stratification and the control of cheap labour**

Since the 2000s, a variety of people with differential access to investment capital, land and education, and with income from the military sector, state government, national companies and the humanitarian and development sectors, have been able to both

profit from the evolution of the regional economy and to shepherd its transformation. The most visible people investing and managing this changing economy are ex-SPLA senior staff and other members of the old rebel government apparatus from the 1980s and 90s, who have accumulated and invested profits from their access to checkpoints, aid drops, taxation systems and access to government tenders and contracts. The next 'generation' of emerging middle and upper classes were those who benefited from new markets and land enclosure during the return and reconstruction period after 2005: this included local government and military officials, with access to new state salaries (until the start of state financial collapse in 2012), but also returning residents with investment capital from businesses in Sudan, Kenya, Uganda or the diaspora, or aid agency and UN workers with access to dollar salaries. Many of these residents spent significant money on court cases to claim old family and 'customary' clan lands to build large farms with title deeds, which they then ran using returnee residents as waged labourers or sharecroppers, with local monopolies allowing depressed wages.

Members of these local middle- and upper-class families have often worked as the officials setting the terms of land re-sales, or as aid workers organising local food aid purchases. In reinforcing their own economic power and encouraging (and organising) the systems of low-waged daily labour that keep their business costs low and their markets keen, they have built sharper verticalities of wealth and dependence over the last twenty years. This is most visible in the changes to cattle-keeping systems. Most residents, where they can, still invest their savings in livestock, avoiding keeping depreciating cash reserves by growing herds kept in gol (family clan) collective camps. Since about 2005 the number of large private herds owned by single individuals and their immediate families has significantly increased, guarded by armed young men paid in cash or in kind.<sup>22</sup> As a cattle camp elder at Maker, near Wadweil village, noted:

This was started recently after peace in 2005, and before that there was nobody that could accumulate and build his own cattle camp. But when these generals returned to home after peace, they have access to money and they bought large private herds and they employ young men to look after them – because he has no children to look after his cattle, he has taken all his children to school, and he is busy working. So he would call a poor man's son and say, look after my cattle and I will pay you a cow after a year; or look after my cattle and I will be paying money ... [but] if we talk about it, it would be political.<sup>23</sup>

Local commercial landowners also profit from exploiting seasonal cycles of food insecurity in the region through holding food in storage until high prices in lean seasons, which maintains high market prices for personal profit. Some landlords provide limited charity in the dry season to buy a bit of gratitude and loyalty, as Peter explained about a major SPLA commander's farm:

It is weeded for money by the locals here. And in the lean season he helps all the households here by distributing to them food in his store, produced in his farms.<sup>24</sup>

These landlords also frequently invest in warehousing grain to sell at higher prices during the hunger gap, when local grain is in peak demand from humanitarian agencies distributing it back to impoverished workers, as Dumo – a manager on his UN-official cousin's large farm east of Aweil – explained:

We don't sell immediately, but we wait until July and August. Some are sold in Aweil, and some organisations come and buy from me. Concern [Worldwide] is here, UMCOR [the United Methodist Committee on Relief] also. They buy the seeds and give them to the community.<sup>25</sup>

Informal labour controls also include controls on out-migration from the region. Men and women have of course always moved out of the region for employment, as workers and soldiers in 19<sup>th</sup>-century armies and trading systems, and as domestic and farm workers in colonial Sudan. Local governments, commercial interests and militaries have generally attempted to exert controls on this migrant labour. As SPLM/A military control was established across the region in the late 1980s, chiefly authorities, army checkpoints and local government officials worked to control migrant men and women, taxing their movements and detaining people for armed work and farm labour. These controls have continued during post-war reconstruction to the present.

The Majok Nyinthiau border post, just before the River Kiir on the road north via Meiram town to Khartoum, provides a usefully explicit example of the extension of these controls since the 2000s. On this key route north, people – particularly women – are only allowed to cross with the permission of a highly military-connected local chief and the Peace Committee, a formerly USAID-funded cross-border body that negotiates inter-ethnic cattle migration routes each season. Detention and court-sanctioned lashing are the common punishments for unsanctioned border crossings. Nyibol, who had fled to Khartoum during the war in the 1990s and returned south in 2009, was trying to cross the border back north without permission when we met her:

My husband died the previous year; he was a soldier in Wunyiik . . . I will travel at night, to pass through the forest, to bypass the security, with my seven children. . . . It is a distance of two days on foot . . . If we're caught, we are lashed. It is the chief of the woman who is trying to escape that decides the number of lashes, at the police post. . . . I will be washing clothes in homes there. Most of the women who were here and who I knew have gone, and I can stay with them before getting a job.<sup>26</sup>

Women emphasised that these brutal border controls are understood to be explicitly about the control of the region's population as a labour and tax reservoir (see also Shanguhya 2021, 88). Along, a market trader now in Aweil, explained that

Your children could be asked to get down from the truck at the bridge, and you, the mother, would be told to go on yourself. The reason [the soldiers give] is that these children do not belong to the mother – these children were brought from the north to vote for separation in the referendum [on national independence in 2011], and to increase the country's population – and if the border is open and free movement is allowed, people will go and the population will go down, and the population has already decreased in these eight years.<sup>27</sup>

This creates a sense of physical and economic entrapment, as Samson worries: 'this is not a future; I'm supposed to have social insurance for me and my family, and do something for [South] Sudan, I cannot be cornered in one place.'<sup>28</sup> This theme is common in current songs, including Monde Lual's untitled poem:

As politicians make it hard all around the borders

They are drowning in corruption, while we run like lunatics.<sup>29</sup>

Residents also note education as another key form of control. Many men and women emphasise how since 2013 teachers have been recruited into the military or otherwise left teaching due to a lack of payment, and rural schools have been forced to close. As rural state education has quickly collapsed, government and military officials have benefited from a cheap young agricultural workforce looking to make money for urban school costs, and many wealthy locals have opened private schools in regional towns to profit from desperate young people's search for education options. Michael, a private school teacher in Nyamlel town, explained the common view that the educational inequality that has developed since the late 2000s will maintain the authoritarian governance system and labour exploitation:

The children of the elite people are sent to Juba, to Kampala, to Nairobi, to go and get a better education, and the children of the common man are just sent to schools where there aren't even good facilities like buildings – they're not there – no qualified teachers, and there's even no textbooks ... And this will remain like that: because if their children are getting a better education, when they come back later with that quality education, they will again be the leaders, and they'll rule over these children of the common man, on the ground here.<sup>30</sup>

These educational inequalities, facilitated in part by the government and military authorities whose children will likely benefit from them, are part of a wider local analysis of the entrenchment of class stratification. As Akuin noted, 'the worst thing now is, if you are poor and unemployed, they *make sure* that you'll always stay poor.'<sup>31</sup> Luciano, a labourer who works on seasonal migrant paths in Darfur and Khartoum – avoiding and bribing security – explained

you can see now in [South Sudan and] Sudan the division of people into classes is taking place ... as long as they are controlling and securing opportunities for their children, the more the poor people are also losing their opportunities.<sup>32</sup>

We argue here that analyses of South Sudan's 'elite' political economy should follow Along, Akuin, Luciano and Michael in their wider and historicised analysis of processes of class stratification and wealth consolidation. Their analysis contextualises and disaggregates these 'elites' and their central competitions over oil rents and state power within wider processes of marketisation, land privatisation, restricted educational pathways and labour commodification. Like vice presidents and senior military commanders, other locally wealthy, ostensibly middle-class residents with UN jobs or customs office postings are also heavily invested in maintaining and profiting from land privatisation and cheap workers relying on cash wages from cattle herding, farming, or military work.

### **Military work and the labour market of South Sudan's security apparatus**

These new rentier and investor classes' investments rely on cheap workers, including for military work. Many of these investors' economic and political positions are underpinned by their ability to recruit men into armed work: as cattle guards for valuable herds, 'community police' for local paramilitary service, private militias, or into battalions of national armed forces.

Extensive research already focuses on how people positioning for political power in South Sudan draw on their ability to instigate armed conflict (Pendle 2015; Stringham and Forney 2017; Boswell 2019). Mobilising this credible threat of armed violence requires



financial power generated often through regional economic monopolies. In Northern Bahr el Ghazal since 2010, the former Governor and ex-Chief of General Staff of the SPLA Paul Malong Awan, and now the Ayii Akol family, including current Vice-President Hussein Abdel Bagi Ayii Akol, have built monopolies around controlling large commercial farms, markets and checkpoints stretching across the Darfur border (Kindersley 2018; Kindersley and Majok 2019). Recent research has explored how competitors for state power have recruited and maintained their military workforces through dispensing loot, loans and assets (Pinaud 2016). This research reflects the commodification of resources, relationships and labour within the wider economic transformations of the last forty years; but it often does not explore where the money and workers come from.

Military work is familiar to most families in this region. Over about twenty years of civil war, a significant proportion of men did armed work of various kinds in local defence groups or within the SPLA. The post-peace Juba Declaration in 2006 determined that Southern Sudanese militia groups would be integrated into the SPLA forces, to paper over divisions and provide jobs. Regional commanders including then-Governor Paul Malong organised post-peace recruitment, boosting their numbers to support their arguments for higher ranks and positions within the new regional government, and as a way to provide for extended kin. At South Sudan's national independence in 2011, the SPLA was about 55% of the entire government payroll, growing four times faster than the whole population (Kuol 2019, 10). In Northern Bahr el Ghazal, continued recruitment was also a useful way to respond to the labour surplus of large numbers of underemployed ex-urban young men. Clashes with Sudan over the disputed Aweil borderland at Majok Yinthiou in 2008 and Heglig in 2012 helped justify the relatively informal expansion of this borderland army.

Recruitment into local battalions and 'defence forces' continued into the civil war from 2013, fuelled by the manpower needs of Salva Kiir's government faction. Rebellions of frustrated generals and other dissidents across the borderland in 2015, 2016 and 2017 also exploited the flight of young workers across the border into the farms and towns of Darfur during economic collapse and repeated rural droughts in the area from 2015 onwards (Associated Press 2017). Rebel militias recruited coercively and through promises of post-conflict salaries and demobilisation bonuses: for poor young men, particularly young teens with low earning power, this was not necessarily a worse offer than other options (Kindersley and Majok 2020, 20–21, 26).

This military labour market of course reflects local class dynamics, as casual market worker Thiel explained: 'big people do not want their sons to join – except with assignments to offices with money, like logistics and finance, but in the front line they leave it to poor men's sons, who have no other option to survive.'<sup>33</sup> New recruit to the South Sudan People's Defence Force (SSPDF) Akol knows he has very little chance of accessing what a fellow recruit Simon calls the 'wet bits' of armed employment; postings with a chance of self-funding, through checkpoint levies or through local market monopolies, for instance.<sup>34</sup> As James, a soldier in three different national armies and militias, told us: 'the old saying "man fashala fi hayatahu sara jundian" (if someone's failed in their life, they'll become a soldier) is becoming a reality these days.'<sup>35</sup>

But even if recruits are paid terribly or sent to remote front lines, the military labour market still holds the possibilities of climbing the greasy socio-economic ladder and escaping local circumstances (see also Mynster Christensen 2016, 23). Market logics help to legitimate the pursuit of personal accumulation: this can be framed by recruits

as macho entrepreneurship, justifying material self-interest (Wiegratz 2016, 338). Buying into this system might, if you perform correctly, lead to individual promotion into higher social and professional ranks, with the ability to invest in family, farming and cattle businesses, and therefore participate in – rather than be subjected to – South Sudan’s political economy. Jobbing military worker James noted that one of the key benefits of military work is this ability to feel a cut above this grim everyday, through the kinds of chauvinist ethno-political elitism and the projected (potential, if not actual) power that a uniform gives.<sup>36</sup> Being at least partially involved in the powerful state military apparatus, even as the impoverished grunt workers of the system, is a source of private knowledge and practical expertise (Debos 2011; Hoffman 2011). This is particularly true for those who manage to get into national security work: ‘he can walk with his pistol exposed in public, he can threaten whoever he wishes to arrest with detention.’<sup>37</sup> The worldview that state military employment propagates allows young men to justify self-advancement at the expense of the interests and safety of society, and is part of the production of soldiers who will perpetrate acts of horrific brutality, including in the name of Dinka ethnic supremacy (Pinaud 2020; Boswell et al. 2019, 34).

### Political futures and pathways out of the region

Many young men and women emphasised the political utility of this economic system as a method of atomisation and disorganisation, with daily workloads and uncertain incomes (as well as ethnic discrimination) undermining attempts at collective challenge.<sup>38</sup> As a border post resident noted, ‘we don’t have the voice and we don’t have the right.’<sup>39</sup> Many people draw comparisons between the Ingaz regime of Omar el-Bashir – who dramatically fell from power in a popular uprising in 2019, after twenty years of rule – and the current power structures in South Sudan, emphasising how the current South Sudanese government makes brutal examples of its critics (Tut Pur and Human Rights Watch 2020).

The lack of good work, potential investment, social security and sense of a future is driving people northwards, to paths across Sudan towards Egypt or Libya, which are the easiest and cheapest ways out of the region.<sup>40</sup> When we met William, he was making plans to leave the borderland, and reflecting on what felt like a rejection of citizens’ skills and energy: ‘I don’t want to stay here anymore . . . I am a builder, a driver and a mechanic, and I will make a decision about what to do and where to go – but in reality, South Sudan has turned people down, and I am sorry.’<sup>41</sup> Out-migration, as Manyang said, ‘does not solve their problems, but there are no other options left’.<sup>42</sup> The choice to head for Europe is explained as a kind of suicide, both social and personal. But as Samson explained, ‘young men are migrating even if they have to die in the sea or in the desert.’<sup>43</sup> Memorial images of young men who had died in Libya or on the way to Europe circulate on WhatsApp.

Residents understand the European Union’s violent extraversion of its border controls in the Mediterranean as part of the constellation of militarised and exploitative barriers they face. Samson explained that he saw ‘Europeans blocking Africans from the modern world . . . keeping Africans [from understanding] the ongoing global changes that are taking place.’<sup>44</sup> In connecting local working lives with the wider racial politics of migration and access to knowledge, borderland residents agree with much of the wider academic scholarship on this modern economic history of Africa (Shiple, Mbembe, and Comaroff

2010, 660; Luna 2018; Edwards, Hill, and Neves-Sarriegui 2020, 7). But of course academia is cut off from these residents, as Luciano emphasised: 'you cannot spend all your life studying, just staying like that, because we are Africans. If we were like white people or other nations whose lives are stable, you can study your whole life without any problem.'<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

This study presents a small part of a wider modern history of extractive and exploitative political economies in Africa since the 1980s. The changes noted by residents here are part of hundreds of years of labour exploitation and control that have underpinned many systems of armed rule. But while poverty and exploitation are not new, there has been a rapid shift towards individualised and market-dependent labour within South Sudan since the 1980s and especially since the 2000s. Daily wage labour and market dependency in this increasingly restrictive political economy limits people's ability to invest, including in education; and it creates daily risks and stresses that break down the time and space for mutual aid or longer-term plans.

In South Sudan today, though, most political analyses have very little interest in these class dynamics and labour systems. After decades of emergency food aid programmes, most humanitarian and development sector analyses still see most South Sudanese people as impoverished but subsistent, needing only technical skills and access to markets to develop themselves out of poverty. At the other end of the social hierarchy, South Sudan's 'elite' political economy is currently most clearly described as a small oligopoly jostling via personal deals and threats of armed mobilisation. This analysis uses a monetised language often without interrogating the monetary landscape, or exploring the wider economic and class systems that this small private marketplace relies on (Young 2014, 56). This means that many political economy analyses of South Sudan are currently light on the economics.

This study has evidenced how repeatedly-reconstructed rural economies have built the market labour systems that maintain strata of increasingly wealthy South Sudanese rentiers and investors. It encourages a worker-focused approach to understanding how South Sudan's political economy works. This approach begins to disaggregate the idea of an 'elite' into a more useful understanding of the class relationships, systems and logics that have been developed to profit from and legitimate exploitation since the 1980s. This approach also challenges the implicit idea that there is very little political theory going on within this landscape of militarised patronage and neoliberal development (following Kang 2017; Fisher and Gilbert 2013, 90). In tracing South Sudanese residents' explanations of their working lives, and their own analyses of the evolution and workings of this political economy, this study supports the wider call for economic history from the perspectives and theories of those living within it.

## Notes

1. In Dinka, this final phrase is 'piir acuop cum kuc riɛl ku pir ee duööt kuëc γɛn'.
2. Interviews and group discussions were undertaken in Wanyjok, Maluakon, Warawar and Majok Nyinthiou towards Kordofan (Aweil East); in Gokmachar, Ariath and Kiir Adem towards Darfur (Aweil North); in Nyamlel and Wedweil (Aweil West); in Aweil town, Apada and Alel to the West of Aweil town (Aweil Centre); and in Malek Alel and Pan-Jap (Aweil South).

Additional interviews were conducted in Juba's Custom and Gudele markets, and in the Juba suburbs of Jebel Dinka, Referendum and Mia Saba; and in Khartoum, in Haj Yousif and Jebel Aulia, with South Sudanese migrant workers.

3. Their accounts are made pseudonymous here for their safety.
4. The X-Border Local Research Network, a component of the FCDO's Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) programme, funded by UK aid from the UK government. The Network carries out research to better understand the causes and impacts of conflict in border areas and their international dimensions. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies. This research was conducted by the Rift Valley Institute, which works in Eastern and Central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development: <http://riftvalley.net/projects/x-border-local-research-network>.
5. We want to thank Anna Rowett, Mimi Bior and staff of RVI Juba for their support and strong ethical principles.
6. Interview with executive chief from Abiem, Juba, 17 August 2017; interview with elderly paramount chief in Nyamlel, 19 August 2017.
7. Interview with deputy paramount chief, Wadweil, 24 August 2017.
8. This work was unevenly spread across the region, reflecting the uneven impact of the war's devastation and displacement.
9. Peter, interviewed in a cattle camp in Alel, 9 September 2019.
10. Manyang, interviewed in Warawar, 13 December 2018.
11. Garang, interviewed at Maper chiefs' court, 4 September 2019; Mel, interviewed with friends at Maluil Akoong, 5 September 2019.
12. Wol, interviewed in Kalakla in Khartoum, 28 September 2019.
13. Regina, interviewed in Maper Market outside Aweil town, 9 December 2018.
14. Winnie Joanne, 'What it means to be that child.'
15. Ngor, interviewed with friends at Akuem market, 4 September 2019; Angelina, interviewed on her rented farm in Alel, 30 August 2019; Garang, interviewed at Maper chiefs' court, 4 September 2019.
16. Martha, interviewed at her church in Maper village, 9 December 2018.
17. Athian, interviewed in Ariath village, 10 December 2018.
18. Dut, interviewed in Maper, 29 August 2019.
19. As described by Cleto, interviewed at Kalakla-Guba, Khartoum, 24 September 2019; and by John, interviewed at Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 29 September 2019.
20. Yual, interviewed at Chamanguei, 3 September 2019.
21. Athian, interviewed in Ariath village, 10 December 2018.
22. Aher, interviewed in a cattle camp in Alel, 9 September 2019.
23. Cattle camp elders, interviewed at Maker near Wadweil, 12 December 2018.
24. Peter, interviewed at Udhum market, 7 September 2019.
25. Dumo, interviewed on his farm at Nyalath, 15 December 2018.
26. Nyibol, interviewed at Majok Nyinthiau border post, 14 December 2018.
27. Along, interviewed in Maper market, 8 December 2018.
28. Samson, interviewed in central Khartoum, 24 September 2019.
29. Monde Lual, 'Untitled.'
30. Michael, interviewed with other teachers at Nyamlel, 12 December 2018.
31. Akuin, interviewed with friends at Malek Alel, Aweil South, 6 September 2019. Our emphasis.
32. Luciano, interviewed in central Khartoum, 25 September 2019. Similar analyses were made by Cattle camp elders, interviewed at Maker near Wadweil, 12 December 2018; and by All, a market stall worker interviewed at Nyamlel market day, 12 December 2018.
33. Thiel, interviewed in Aweil town, 2 September 2019.
34. These take various forms, such as the national security sector's monopoly on fuel distribution across Juba; SPLA and SPLM/A-IO sale and taxation of teak plantations and artisan gold-mining across the Equatorias; and the armed control of charcoal production and/or trade and taxation across the country.
35. James, interviewed in Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 2 October 2019.

36. Ibid.
37. Deng, interviewed in Juba, 25 September 2019.
38. Adhal, interviewed at Majok Nyinthiau border post, 14 December 2018; Bol, interviewed with friends at Akuem, 4 September 2019; Abdalla, interviewed at Jebel Aulia, Khartoum, 24 September 2019.
39. Dheifallah, interviewed at Warawar border checkpoint, 12 December 2018.
40. Heading to Uganda or Kenya requires significant money for long-distance travel and preferably some English language skills. On the border with Sudan, more people speak some Sudanese Arabic.
41. William, interviewed at Malek Alel, 6 September 2019.
42. Manyang, interviewed at Warawar, 13 December 2018.
43. Samson, interviewed in central Khartoum, 24 September 2019.
44. Ibid.
45. Luciano, interviewed in central Khartoum, 25 September 2019.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Anna Rowett, Head of the South Sudan Office of the Rift Valley Institute, for her strong support for this research and giving us the opportunity to work with the Institute over the last five years. We thank Marko Dut Garang, Santino Garang Akot, Paulino Dhieu Tem, Asunta Abuk Deng and Samuel Nicola Kornelio for their work on this research over the years, and their ideas and enthusiasm. We would also like to thank Anna, Mimi Bior, Alex Miskin Simple, Machot Amuom, Mark Bradbury, Eddie Thomas, Cedric Barnes and all the other national and international researchers affiliated with the Rift Valley Institute – too many to name here – who supported us in this work. Nicki would like to thank the Harry F. Guggenheim Foundation for their support and encouragement during fieldwork and writing. We dedicate this research to the memory of our friend and fellow researcher Santino Garang Akot.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the Rift Valley Institute as part of the X-Border Local Research Network, a component of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)'s Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) programme, funded by the UK government. See <http://riftvalley.net/projects/x-border-local-research-network>.

## Notes on contributors

*Nicki Kindersley* is Lecturer in African History at Cardiff University, and formerly the Harry F. Guggenheim Research Fellow at Pembroke College, University of Cambridge. She works on histories of labour, migration and political thought in South Sudan and its borderlands.

*Joseph Diing Majok Majok* is a lead researcher at the Rift Valley Institute, South Sudan, and a Catto Scholarship holder at the Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh University. He is a historical anthropologist of gendered labour systems.

## ORCID

Nicki Kindersley  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3220-5302>

Joseph Diing Majok Majok  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3329-0211>

## References

- Abourahme, N. 2018. "Of Monsters and Boomerangs: Colonial Returns in the Late Liberal City." *City* 22 (1): 106–115. doi:10.1080/13604813.2018.1434296.
- Akuany, D. D. 1991. "The Socio-Economic and Political Conditions of the Southern Sudanese People in Khartoum." In *Sudan: Environment and People*, 70. Vol. 3. Durham: SSSUK.
- Associated Press. 2017. "'sliding into Catastrophe:' South Sudan Famine Could Spread", 11 April 2017. <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2017/04/11/sliding-into-catastrophe-south-sudan-famine-could-spread.html>.
- Badiey, N. 2013. "The Strategic Instrumentalization of Land Tenure in "State-Building": The Case of Juba, South Sudan." *Africa* 83 (1): 57–77. doi:10.1017/S000197201200071X.
- Boswell, A., N. Yamanaka, A. Sarkar, and A. de Waal. 2019. *The Security Arena in South Sudan: A Political Marketplace Study*. LSE: Conflict Research Programme.
- Boswell, A. 2019. 'INSECURE POWER AND VIOLENCE: The Rise AND Fall of Paul Malong AND the Mathiang Anyoor'. Briefing Paper. HSBA Small Arms Survey.
- Brass, T. 2015. "Free Markets, Unfree Labour: Old Questions Answered, New Answers Questioned." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 45 (3): 531–540. doi:10.1080/00472336.2015.1007517.
- Callaci, E. 2017. *Street Archives and City Life: Popular Intellectuals in Postcolonial Tanzania*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Christensen, M. 2016. "The Underbelly of Global Security: Sierra Leonean Ex-Militias in Iraq." *African Affairs* 115 (458): 23–43. doi:10.1093/afraf/adv055.
- D'Agoût, M. 2018. 'Taming the Dominant Gun Class in South Sudan'. Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/taming-dominant-gun-class-south-sudan>.
- Debos, M. 2011. "Living by the Gun in Chad: Armed Violence as a Practical Occupation." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 49 (3): 409–428. doi:10.1017/S0022278X11000267.
- Deng, L. B. 2010. "Social Capital and Civil War: The Dinka Communities in Sudan's Civil War." *African Affairs* 109 (435): 231–250. doi:10.1093/afraf/adq001.
- Deng, D. K. 2019. *Housing, Land and Property Disputes in South Sudan*. South Sudan: South Sudan Law Society.
- Duffield, M. 2002. "Aid and Complicity: The Case of War-Displaced Southerners in the Northern Sudan." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 40 (1): 83–104. doi:10.1017/S0022278X01003822.
- Edwards, A. D., P. Hill, and J. Neves-Sarriegui. 2020. "Capitalism In Global History\*." *Past & Present* 249 (1): e1–32. doi:10.1093/pastj/gtaa044.
- Fisher, M., and J. Gilbert. 2013. "Capitalist Realism and Neoliberal Hegemony: Jeremy Gilbert A Dialogue." *New Formations* 80 (80): 89–101. doi:10.3898/neWF.80/81.05.2013.
- French, L. 2019. "Refugee Narratives; Oral History and Ethnography; Stories and Silence." *The Oral History Review* 46 (2): 267–276. doi:10.1093/ohr/ohz007.
- Garang, G., and J. Kuol. 2013. *Administrative Evolution of Northern Bahr El Ghazal State, 1983-2013*. Kampala, Uganda: A M Printing & Publishing.
- Genevieve, L., and A. J. Ayers. 2013. "The Rise of a "New Slavery"? Understanding African Unfree Labour through Neoliberalism." *Third World Quarterly* 34 (5): 873–892. doi:10.1080/01436597.2013.800738.
- Graeber, D. 2012. *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. London: Penguin UK.
- Greco, E. 2015. "Landlords in the Making: Class Dynamics of the Land Grab in Mbarali, Tanzania." *Review of African Political Economy* 42 (144): 225–244. doi:10.1080/03056244.2014.992403.
- Green, W. N., and J. Estes. 2019. "Precarious Debt: Microfinance Subjects and Intergenerational Dependency in Cambodia." *Antipode* 51 (1): 129–147. doi:10.1111/anti.12413.

- Guyer, J. I. 2016. *Legacies, Logics, Logistics: Essays in the Anthropology of the Platform Economy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Harvey, D. 2005. *Spaces of Neoliberalization: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*.
- Hoffman, D. 2011. "VIOLENCE, JUST IN TIME: War and Work IN Contemporary West Africa." *Cultural Anthropology* 26 (1): 34–57. doi:10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01079.x.
- IOM. 2013. *Returnee Area of Return Data 2007-2013*. IOM, Juba, South Sudan.
- Jedrej, M. C. 1983. "The Growth and Decline of a Mechanical Agriculture Scheme in West Africa." *African Affairs* 82 (329): 541–558. doi:10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a097554.
- Jędrej, M. C. 2000. "Ingessana and the Legacy of the Funj Sultanate: The Consequences of Turkish Conquest on the Blue Nile." *Africa* 70 (2): 278–297. doi:10.3366/afr.2000.70.2.278.
- Johnson, D. H. 1988. 'Recruitment and Entrapment in Private Slave Armies: The Structure of the Zará'ib in the Southern Sudan'. *Slavery & Abolition*, 13/1 (1992) 162-173. doi:10.1080/01440399208575056.
- Jok, J. M. 2021. "Lessons in Failure: Peacebuilding in Sudan/South Sudan." In *The State of Peacebuilding in Africa: Lessons Learned for Policymakers and Practitioners*, edited by T. McNamee and M. Muyangwa, 363–377. Cham: Springer International Publishing. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-46636-7\_20.
- Justin, P. H., and H. van Dik. 2017. "Land Reform and Conflict in South Sudan: Evidence from Yei River County." *Africa Spectrum* 52 (2): 3–28. doi:10.1177/000203971705200201.
- Kang, T. K. 2017. "Neoliberal Threats to Local Governance in South Sudan." *SSRN Electronic Journal*. doi:10.2139/ssrn.3147426.
- Karekwaivanane, G. H. 2019. "'Tapanduka Zvamuchese': Facebook, 'Unruly Publics', and Zimbabwean Politics." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 13 (1): 54–71. doi:10.1080/17531055.2018.1547257.
- Kim, J., A. Humphrey, A. Marshak, N. M. Gathuoy, and V. Krishnan. 2020. 'THE CURRENCY OF CONNECTIONS: Why Do Social Connections Matter for Household Resilience in South Sudan?': Feinstein International Center, Tufts University.
- Kindersley, N. 2018. *Politics, Power and Chiefship in Famine and War: A Study of the Former Northern Bahr El Ghazal State, South Sudan*. Rift Valley Institute.
- Kindersley, N., and J. Diing Majok. 2019. "Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized Labour in South Sudan's Borderlands." Juba, South Sudan.
- Kindersley, N., and J. Diing Majok. 2020. 'Breaking Out of the Borderlands: Understanding Migrant Pathways from Northern Bahr El-Ghazal, South Sudan'. X-Border Local Research Network. Juba, South Sudan: Rift Valley Institute.
- Koejok, M., and D. Dut. 1989. "The Malual Dinka-Baggara Border Conflict and the Impact on National Integration in the Sudan." *Peace and Stability in the Horn of Africa*. Durham: Michigan State University.
- Koejok, M., and D. Dut. 1990. 'The Northern Bahr Al-Ghazal: People, Alien Encroachment and Rule, 1856-1956'. Ph.D., United States – California: University of California, Santa Barbara. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/303825863/abstract/60EB129E7125475DPQ/1>.
- Kuol, L. B. D. 2019. "South Sudan: The Elusive Quest for a Resilient Social Contract?" *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 2019 (1): 1–20. doi:10.1080/17502977.2019.1627692.
- Kusakabe, K., and A. Chan Myae. 2019. "Precarity and Vulnerability: Rubber Plantations in Northern Laos and Northern Shan State, Myanmar." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49 (4): 586–601. doi:10.1080/00472336.2018.1554161.
- Larmer, M. 2017. "Permanent Precarity: Capital and Labour in the Central African Copperbelt." *Labor History* 58 (2): 170–184. doi:10.1080/0023656X.2017.1298712.
- Leonard, L. 2019. "Women Who Change into Men: A Gendered History of Precarity in "Useful" Chad." *Africa* 89 (3): 521–540. doi:10.1017/S0001972019000500.
- Luna, J. K. 2018. "The Chain of Exploitation: Intersectional Inequalities, Capital Accumulation, and Resistance in Burkina Faso's Cotton Sector." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 2018 (2): 1–22. doi:10.1080/03066150.2018.1499623.
- Majok, J. D. 2019. 'War, Migration and Work: Changing Social Relations in the South Sudan Borderlands', October, 18.

- Mavelli, L. 2018. "Citizenship for Sale and the Neoliberal Political Economy of Belonging." *International Studies Quarterly* 62 (3): 482–493. doi:10.1093/isq/sqy004.
- Mawson, A. N. M. 1991. "Il Murahaleen Raids on the Dinka, 1985–89." *Disasters* 15 (2): 137–149. doi:10.1111/j.1467-7717.1991.tb00443.x.
- Maxwell, D., E. Stites, S. C. Robillard, and M. Wagner. 2017. 'A Synthesis of Feinstein International Center Work on Building Resilience and Protecting Livelihoods in Conflict-Related Crises'. Feinstein International Center, Tufts University.
- Mazurana, D. 2013. *Research Methods in Conflict Settings : A View from Below*.
- Meier, L. C. 2013. *Returning to Northern Bahr El Ghazal*. MA thesis from Lund University, Lund, Sweden, 2013 . <https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/lup/publication/3798928>.
- Munive, J. 2014. "Invisible Labour: The Political Economy of Reintegration in South Sudan." *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 8 (4): 334–356. doi:10.1080/17502977.2014.964451.
- Newhouse, L. S. 2017. "Assembling Land Control after Displacement: Some Reflections from Rural Southern Sudan." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44 (5): 1000–1021. doi:10.1080/03066150.2016.1191472.
- Nyaba, P. A. 2002. 'Report on the Trade Consultancy Conducted in Northern Bahr El Ghazal'. Save the Children Fund (UK). Sudan Open Archive.
- Nyantakyi-Frimpong, H., and R. Bezner Kerr. 2017. "Land Grabbing, Social Differentiation, Intensified Migration and Food Security in Northern Ghana." *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44 (2): 421–444. doi:10.1080/03066150.2016.1228629.
- Oya, C. 2013. "The Land Rush and Classic Agrarian Questions of Capital and Labour: A Systematic Scoping Review of the Socioeconomic Impact of Land Grabs in Africa." *Third World Quarterly* 34 (9): 1532–1557. doi:10.1080/01436597.2013.843855.
- Pendle, N. 2015. "'They are Now Community Police": Negotiating the Boundaries and Nature of the Government in South Sudan through the Identity of Militarised Cattle-Keeper." *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 22 (3): 410–434. doi:10.1163/15718115-02203006.
- Pendle, N. R. 2020. "Politics, Prophets and Armed Mobilizations: Competition and Continuity over Registers of Authority in South Sudan's Conflicts." *Journal of Eastern African Studies*: 1–20. doi:10.1080/17531055.2019.1708545.
- Pinaud, C. 2014. "South Sudan: Civil War, Predation and the Making of a Military Aristocracy." *African Affairs* 113 (451): 192–211. doi:10.1093/afraf/adu019.
- Pinaud, C. 2016. "Military Kinship, Inc.: Patronage, Inter-Ethnic Marriages and Social Classes in South Sudan." *Review of African Political Economy* 43 (148): 243–259. doi:10.1080/03056244.2016.1181054.
- Pinaud, C. 2020. "Genocidal Rape in South Sudan: Organization, Function, and Effects." *HUMAN RIGHTS QUARTERLY* 42 (3): 667–694. doi:10.1353/hrq.2020.0037.
- Pinaud, C. 2021. 'War Economy, Warlordism, and Social Class Formation in South Sudan'. In *Rebel Economies: Warlords, Insurgents, Humanitarians* (), edited by N. Di Cosmo, D. Fassin. Lexington Books, Washington, DC.
- Rights, A. 1995. *Sudan's Invisible Citizens: The Policy of Abuse against Displaced People in the North*. London: African Rights.
- Rockenbauch, T., and P. Sakdapolrak. 2017. "Social Networks and the Resilience of Rural Communities in the Global South: A Critical Review and Conceptual Reflections." *Ecology and Society*. 22, 1. doi:10.5751/ES-09009-220110.
- Rosario, T. C.-D., and J. Rigg. 2019. "Living in an Age of Precarity in 21st Century Asia." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 49 (4): 517–527. doi:10.1080/00472336.2019.1581832.
- Rubin, J. D., S. Fioratta, and J. W. Paller. 2019. "Ethnographies of Emergence: Everyday Politics and Their Origins across Africa Introduction." *Africa* 89 (3): 429–436. doi:10.1017/S0001972019000457.
- Shanguhya, M. S. 2021. "Insecure Borderlands, Marginalization, and Local Perceptions of the State in Turkana, Kenya, Circa 1920–2014." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 15 (1): 85–107. doi:10.1080/17531055.2020.1868195.
- Shipley, J. W., A. Mbembe, and J. Comaroff. 2010. "Africa in Theory: A Conversation between Jean Comaroff and Achille Mbembe." *Anthropological Quarterly* 83 (3): 653–678. doi:10.1353/anq.2010.0010.



- Sikainga, A. A. 2000. "Military Slavery and the Emergence of a Southern Sudanese Diaspora in the Northern Sudan, 1884-1954." In *White Nile, Black Blood: War, Leadership, and Ethnicity from Khartoum to Kampala*, edited by J. Spaulding and S. Beswick, 23–37. Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press.
- Stringham, N., and J. Forney. 2017. "It Takes a Village to Raise a Militia: Local Politics, the Nuer White Army, and South Sudan's Civil Wars." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 55 (2): 177–199. doi:10.1017/S0022278X17000064.
- Szeman, I. 2015. "Entrepreneurship as the New Common Sense." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114 (3): 471–490. doi:10.1215/00382876-3130701.
- Theron, S. 2020. "Power and Influence in Post-Secession South Sudan: A Leadership Perspective on Nation-Building." *African Security Review* 2020 (1): 1–24. doi:10.1080/10246029.2020.1748672.
- Thiong, D. A. 2018. "How the Politics of Fear Generated Chaos in South Sudan." *African Affairs*, July. doi:10.1093/afraf/ady031.
- Thomas, E. 2013. "Labor and the Making of Central African Borders." In *The Borderlands of South Sudan: Authority and Identity in Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, edited by C. Vaughan, M. Schomerus, and V. Lotje de. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US: 193–211. Palgrave Series in African Borderlands Studies. doi:10.1057/9781137340894\_10.
- Thomas, E. 2017. "Patterns of Growth and Inequality in Sudan, 1977-2017." In *Durham Middle East Papers*. Vol. 25. Durham, UK.
- Thomas, E. 2019. *Moving Towards Markets: Cash, Commodification and Conflict in South Sudan'. X-Border Local Research Network*. Juba/London: Rift Valley Institute.
- Tut Pur, Nyagoah and Human Rights Watch (Organization). 2020. *'What Crime Was I Paying For?': Abuses by South Sudan's National Security Service*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/12/14/what-crime-was-i-paying/abuses-south-sudans-national-security-service>.
- Vokes, R., and D. Mills. 2015. "'Time for School'? School Fees, Savings Clubs and Social Reciprocity in Uganda." *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 9 (2): 326–342. doi:10.1080/17531055.2015.1042627.
- Waal, A. D. 2014. "When Kleptocracy Becomes Insolvent: Brute Causes of the Civil War in South Sudan." *African Affairs* 113 (452): 347–369. doi:10.1093/afraf/adu028.
- Waal, A. D. 2019. "A Political Marketplace Framework Analysis. Conflict Research Programme, LSE, occasional paper No 19, August 2019, London UK.
- Wiegatz, J. 2016. *Neoliberal Moral Economy: Capitalism, Socio-Cultural Change and Fraud in Uganda*. Lanham, USA.
- Yath, A. 1993. "Dinka Migrants in Khartoum: Coping Strategies in the Face of Economic and Political Hardships: The Example of the Suq El Markazi Squatter Settlement, Sudan." In *Coping with Vulnerability and Criticality: Case Studies on Food-Insecure People and Places*, edited by H.-G. Bohle, 59–80. Vol. 1. Freiburg: Breitenbach: Freiburg Studies in Development Geography.
- Young, G. 2014. *The Political Economy of Resistance in Post-Conflict South Sudan*. MPhil, University of St Andrews. <https://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/handle/10023/6608>.