

Economic, Infrastructure Development Are Top Priorities in South Sudan

The Hon. Betty Achan Ogwaro, Agriculture Minister for the Republic of South Sudan, was interviewed by EIR's Lawrence K. Freeman on Dec. 15, 2011.

Freeman: Could you give us a brief overview of what the conditions are in South Sudan, in terms of agriculture? There have been reports that there are 3 million people without food security. I know this is of great concern to you, and I want to get an idea how you want to address that problem.

Ogwaro: Indeed, agriculture is the backbone of South Sudan, because 80% of the people live on the soil. They grow their own food, and they also pick from what God has given in the wild, like fruits and honey.

The story that 3 million people are having food shortage is not completely true. There is a food gap, actually 300,000 metric tons, not 3 million people.

We did this assessment and we also looked at the land that the people have cultivated. We estimated the yield by calculating from the average acreage (feddan) cultivated, and the average yield over the years per feddan. We have been doing this every year, so we know, and we have assessed how much the yield would be. And that is how we came with the calculation of the food gap.

But the food gap increased to 300,000 metric tons mainly because of the returning population, especially those who are returning from Khartoum [the capital of Sudan, in the north]. In addition to these, there are those who are returning from Uganda and Kenya; those who are returning after the independence—the independence was on the 9th of July, and that's already in the middle of the rainy season. So they are returning at the time that they cannot cultivate the main staple food; they can only cultivate for the second season. And that



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“We need the North as much as they need us,” admitted Agriculture Minister Ogwaro.

gives them less opportunity to harvest for the family, so that increases the food gap.

But 1 million people were returning, so these are the people we have calculated will be in serious need of food, and the gap will be big because they will only be depending on what they are given as food aid. And the food aid is very little—it is extremely little.

But in general, agriculture in South Sudan can flourish once the people settle down, for South Sudan is the land for agriculture. It has all the conditions for growing crops; it has all the conditions for rearing animals; it has all the conditions for raising fish. We have the land,

rainfall nine months of the year with an average rainfall of 1,500 mm per year; we have the Nile; we have the tributaries of the Nile; we have several lakes. So, South Sudan, once people settle down, should become really self-sufficient in production.

Labor-Intensive Cultivation

However, the constraints we have at the moment, include poor tools for cultivation. The people are still using hand hoes to cultivate; and then the land itself, because it was left fallow for over 30 years during the war, regenerated itself into the natural forest again. So, the people have to take the pain of clearing this land in order to make way for the cultivation. This is very expensive. Labor is very expensive, and with hand tools, it takes them so much time, and is so labor-intensive. So they have to divide themselves between building homes—because they're coming back to nothing—and then at the same time, cultivating, to produce food.

That is one reason that makes the production not sufficient, because they have to divide their time.

Number two, I have already talked about the inputs.

The tools they're using are not good tools at all. They now need to move on from hoes, maybe, to ox-plows, then tractors, so that they're able to cultivate with more ease, and bigger capacity.

We think mechanization will come in, and we are looking at spots where we can do mechanization, especially in Greater Upper Nile and Greater Bahr el-Gazal, where there are fewer trees, and no tree uprooting will be required; but for the ordinary farmer in Greater Equatoria, I would think ox-plow is the best at the moment. Then they can move on slowly to tractors, and other implements. The more progressive farmers can go on to tractors according to their abilities.

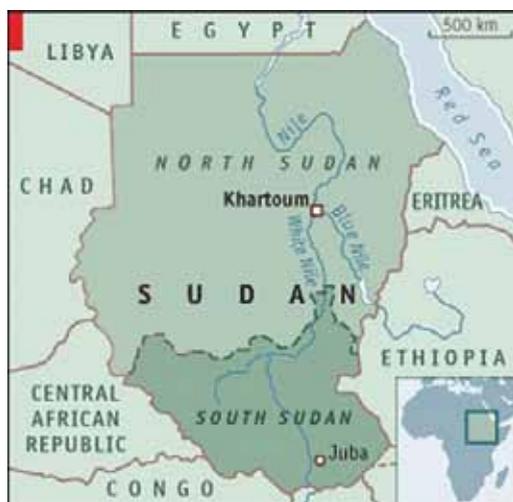
The other thing that is stressing the farmers is, they cannot get access to credits. Because if you are to increase productivity, you need money to either rent the tractors, or hire laborers, or buy quality seeds. The farmers don't have this money. This is a result of living for years as IDPs [internally displaced persons]; they came back barehanded. They don't have any money at all; they don't have homes. They have started building their homes.

All the banks of South Sudan demand collateral. Small rural farmers do not have anything bankable as collateral, when they don't have even a home, a permanent structure which they can call a home. They don't have title deeds to the lands, in order to use them as collateral. So, that is a big challenge.

And as a government, we are also talking to financial institutions, to help us ease this by working with the banks. I must say I'm happy that the USAID have picked this up. The U.S. government has picked it up through the USAID, and they are now negotiating with one bank so that the USAID could put aside some funds as a guarantee to these banks, in order for the farmers to borrow, and that would be like collateral for them.

But we also have issues with the policies that regulate agriculture. We drafted some policies for agriculture and forestry production in 2005 which were enacted by the Legislative Assembly; now we are reviving the policies as a nation. Because the policy we passed

FIGURE 1
Republic of the Sudan and Republic of South Sudan



by the Legislative Assembly in 2005-2006, when we were still part of the Sudan as one country, and some of the issues within those policies are related to Islamic regulations; now we have to pull them out of our policies.

And another thing farmers are facing as a big challenge is that those who want to improve their productivity are not able to transport the produce to the market. The roads that link the farmers at the production areas to the main markets are not yet there; and where there are small feeder roads, cars are not able to go there because of the

potholes, lack of bridges, tree stumps, etc. The vehicle owners refuse to be hired to go to those areas because the cost of maintenance and repair of their vehicles after they break down on those roads is much more than the amount they get from farmers who hire them for transport.

But also, we still have very high pre- and post-harvest losses. The pre-harvest losses come from pests and diseases.

Now, we have one serious pest in the upper part of South Sudan, the queala-queala birds, which, in the past, was being controlled by the Plant Protection Unit [here, which was based in] Khartoum. Now, after independence, this unit moved to Khartoum, and left us without us preparing our ground.

These birds don't actually live in South Sudan, but they migrate in big numbers at the time the sorghum is almost ripe, when it is still at the milky or succulent stage. So they migrate; they come and lay eggs there. When the birds hatch, it's like a virus. So that is another problem. They cannot be controlled by hand, or by scraping; normally they are sprayed.

So we're also looking forwards to working with the DLCO, which is the Desert Locust Control Organization, which used to do the spraying. We need to become members, [and since we are not], that also restricts us; not being members of some of these institutions restricts what we can do.

And we have also experienced the effects of climate change that: Apart from erratic rains, there are other

pests that are coming up. We have this green grasshopper, which used not to be there. Locusts used to come once in a while; now it is the green grasshopper—which is worse than locusts, because it's easier to control locusts—you can spray them—but the green grasshoppers fly. So, it's more difficult to control, and they can clean the ground completely. So, our farmers are facing that problem.

Besides the losses they have when they harvest, and they thresh on the ground, and they put in poor storage, and then all these losses throughout, it reduces that [the crop]. Also, it's increasing the food gap.

A Potential Breadbasket

Freeman: My view of the situation in South Sudan is that agriculture is the key, and that to develop agriculture, we need water, we need power, and we need rail transportation. And not just a road here or there, but my view is that East-West railroads, regional railroads, between South Sudan and North Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia. Sudan has historically been, for decades, the potential breadbasket of the Horn of Africa. There are studies from the old agricultural department in Khartoum of feeding a billion people. This was never done.

I have tried to persuade people in Sudan to take up this fight for agricultural development. That wasn't done; and I think, in terms of how we're going to transform South Sudan, we need credit for massive regional-wide, continental-wide, infrastructure programs, again in power, energy, and rail.

The financial system of the West is collapsing very rapidly. It could collapse completely within a matter of weeks. What steps is the government taking, or your ministry taking, or recommending, for investments in infrastructure that will close the gap? I've read in one of your reports that you're trying to increase your food production up to a million metric tons. What policies are you pursuing? What are the government's investment policies in these areas?

Ogwaro: Our policy is to increase cereal production to a million metric tons, to satisfy the domestic needs, because our need is like 700,000 metric tons.

Freeman: And that would satisfy the population?

Ogwaro: Yes. Our population is approximately 9 million people; the land is big, but the population is not very big. Infrastructure is the key to development of agriculture. In infrastructure, transport is the major key.

The transport includes roads, waterways; it includes

rails, and also air. And then, electricity and dams—all these are within the infrastructure. And that is the number one, key priority of the government. So the government is trying to put all its money to develop some of this infrastructure. What they cannot do alone, they can negotiate with a neighboring country. With Uganda, they've already negotiated—Uganda is bringing the road up to the border of Sudan at Nimule, and now USAID is doing the Nimule-Juba road, which is paved. That is the longest paved road ever in South Sudan.

Freeman: From Juba to Uganda?

Ogwaro: Yes. It will go up to the border of Uganda, and Uganda takes it up from there. And also, on the eastern side, from Nadapala-Kapoeta through Torit to Juba. This is also the priority road. At the moment, it is graveled; but the government wants it paved, so that it's easier. But the challenge of the farmers is now to bring crops from their production areas to these main roads.

So, we are looking for donors or even investors that can help do the feeder roads, not the main roads. The government is doing the trunk and the major roads, so we are looking for the agricultural security roads; these are the feeder roads.

The government is also putting resources into developing agriculture. So the number one is the infrastructure, which includes all those engines which would help the growth of agriculture. And number two is to put it in agriculture itself, because you need to transform it from subsistence to small holders, because we are now below small holders.

Freeman: What's your definition of subsistence versus small holders?

Ogwaro: Subsistence is those who grow just enough for their satisfaction for the year—just enough, not anything beyond that. It is for subsistence or survival only. But small holders grow enough for their own consumption, and some extra for the market to improve their livelihood. And then the medium-size farm would come much bigger than that. At the moment, our people are at a subsistence level.

Hydroelectric Power on the Agenda

Freeman: Energy is a major component, especially if you want to move water. South Sudan is rich in soil, and rich in water. I know that Ethiopia is developing a number of hydroelectric dams, including one about 40



Redento Tombe

“Infrastructure is the key to the development of agriculture,” said Ogwaro, especially transportation—roads and waterways. Here, an agriculture extension officer in Yei County, South Sudan, measures crop spacing for the Ngakoyi Farmers Group.

kilometers from Sudan, the Renaissance Dam, which will have 5,000 MW of power. Are there any programs in these areas, in terms of energy, or rail, to expand the potential of agriculture and the shipment of goods throughout the region?

Ogwaro: Hydroelectric power is one of the projects within the infrastructure that the government wants to do now, and it is crucial, because if you are going to do any industrial work, you need power. As you know, on the Nile River, there is one falls which is close to the border with Uganda, but within the Sudan—the Fulla Falls. And then, along the river up to Juba, there are two other smaller falls. The one nearest to Juba, the better one, is the Beden. And the Beden can generate up to 500 MW. So, the government is looking at this.

Some projects are short-term, which can be done within two years, according to the feasibility studies, like the Beden, which, we are told, could be completed within 18 months. It can generate enough electricity to

supply Juba and all the industrial work around Juba.

The Fulla Falls—there’s Fulla I and Fulla II—which is bigger, can supply all of South Sudan and even part of the neighboring countries. It will take much longer, maybe up to five years. The feasibility studies are now completed—so now the government is looking at, where do we start? Do we start with the smaller one, or do we put money all into the bigger Fulla project? So this is now under discussion in the Council of Ministers.

Freeman: And this would all be done out of the Federal budget of South Sudan? In other words, these would be projects paid for by South Sudan out of revenues?

Ogwaro: Well, you know, the oil revenue is not enough to do all the work in South Sudan. Even agriculture. The oil revenue is not enough to do the infrastructure, and spill over to agriculture. So definitely the government will have to find other sources, because oil revenue is not enough, and is running down. The prices are going down, so the revenue is limited. The government is looking at all options.

Freeman: Presumably, you’d want to get low-interest credit from other countries, so you can make these investments in infrastructure, which sometimes take five, or seven to ten years; if you’re building rail lines, if you’re building power plants, you need long-term low-interest credit.

Ogwaro: The government is looking at all options at the moment.

Freeman: Is USAID providing any major inputs into infrastructure? Or do they just have a general fund?

Ogwaro: USAID actually sponsored some roads; they paved the Juba-Nimule road. And they’re now going to do some of the feeder roads, what we call the agricultural roads.

Freeman: Are there any demands for regional infrastructure?

Ogwaro: Definitely.

North and South Sudan Must Be Allies

Freeman: And the other thing that I argued for before the separation of Sudan, is that North and South Sudan are the most important allies of each other, more than any other countries in the world.

Ogwaro: Definitely.

Freeman: I think that the North made major errors in not integrating the two countries with infrastructure over many years. Are there plans now to carry out any North-South integration, or is that all on hold because of the problems that remain between the two countries?

Ogwaro: Well, as one commander said, even if there is war—this is what he said during the war—development must not stop. But the disagreement we have with the North, is not going to stop any development. We need the North as much as they need us. It is unfortunate, as you said, that all these years, the North decided to keep the South completely out of any development at all—and that is why the Southerners were so angered, and they all voted for separation. But, now you can see that they are our immediate neighbors; we have so much in common with them. So, we have to link up.

Linking up means the infrastructure should be there; the roads should be there. We share the river. Also, the river transport should be there; the air transport should be there.

So, we share a lot of things. And personally, I think, political disagreements now are temporary, because

Khartoum suddenly woke up to realize that separation is a reality. Initially, they didn't believe it would happen, and that's why this aggression. But I believe they know they need the South, as much as the South needs them, and this aggression will slowly die down.

Freeman: I have one other question to ask you: the Jonglei Canal. This has been something I've been in favor of for a long time.

An enormous amount of water is wasted going into the Sudd, and when I interviewed the [Sudanese] Irrigation Minister [Kamal Ali Mohammed] in Khartoum earlier this year [see *EIR*, May 20, 2011], he said, well, I've always been in favor of the Jonglei Canal, but now it's all in the hands of South Sudan. Are there any plans by the current government to finish the Jonglei Canal? It's two-thirds done.

Ogwaro: Well, the government is so busy at the moment trying to look at other priorities, so the Jonglei Canal could be one of the projects, but at the moment, in the next five years, I would say no, or not yet. Besides, we do not have records of the environmental assessment which was done earlier; we need to redo it.

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