Conflict, displacement and children in paid work in the Sudan-South Sudan borderlands

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In this blog, Manal examines the pressures forcing many displaced people, including children, to seek paid labour to supplement dwindling support mechanisms in camps in South Sudan. The author draws on her research in 2024 as part of the XCEPT programme.

By **Manal Abdulaziz Mudir (https://riftvalley.net/publication/events_category/manal-abdulaziz-mudir/)**

Child labour in the Nuba Mountains borders

In 2011, a brutal conflict between Sudanese government troops and Sudan People's Liberation Movement–North (SPLM/N) fighters in the Nuba Mountains region forced civilians caught up in the violence to flee across the border to South Sudan.**[1]** There, in Yida—the first of three refugee camps to be established in the area—the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) saw to the basic needs of those who had been displaced, including their food, shelter, health and education. Refugees were also able to cultivate crops using handmade farming tools, with the fertile land in Yida camp providing consistently good harvests.

Previously, children living in the Nuba Mountains were often involved in unpaid household work such as bricklaying, cattle-grazing and farm work. Having been displaced, however, the comprehensive international support provided—which extended to unaccompanied children separated from their parents—meant this practical assistance was no longer needed.

In 2020, the long proposed resettlement of refugees living in Yida camp brought an end to UNHCR support. As a consequence, many children in Yida—and increasingly the other two camps as well—have had to seek paid work in order to supplement their family income. Such employment, which can often take children beyond the confines of the camp, includes building work, assisting Bagara nomads with cattle-grazing, and selling poles, grass or charcoals. In undertaking such tasks, children are frequently exposed to financial exploitation and dangerous conditions, placing them at risk of physical and emotional harm. Moreover, the dire economic situation faced in the camp has led to rising numbers of girls and young women having to submit to forced and/or early marriage.

Given the current Sudan war has led to a new wave of displaced people seeking refuge in South Sudan, there is a very real possibility that these dynamics will be further exacerbated over the coming months unless appropriate action is taken. This blog is based on XCEPT research in 2024 involving extensive interviews with Nuba Mountains refugees on South Sudan's border to understand these dynamics.

Yida, Ajuong Thok and Pamir refugee camps

Yida, Ajuong Thok and Pamir camps were established in South Sudan's Ruweng administrative area in order to host refugees escaping the Nuba Mountains conflict.**[2]** Yida camp served as the main entry point from South Kordofan, and initially hosted 20,000 refugees—mostly survivors of the Kadugli massacre in June. Shortly afterwards, in November 2011, the Sudanese air force provoked international outrage by dropping two bombs on Yida camp, killing 12 refugees and injuring 20. By 2013, the camp's population had increased to 71,000, the vast majority of whom were women and children.

In March 2013, UNHCR and South Sudan's Commission for Refugees Affairs established Ajoung Thok camp, which initially held 24,000 refugees and currently hosts over 55,000 refugees.**[3]** The last of the three camps to be set up was Pamir in September 2016, which was intended to host refugees relocated from Yida camp. Having started out with 34,000 refugees, the camp is currently home to more than 50,000 people, its population swelled by new arrivals escaping the ongoing war in Sudan.**[4]**

Cuts to Yida camp support

In 2016, UNHCR and the South Sudanese government announced that, given chronic overcrowding issues, the security implications of the camp's location 20 km from the border with Sudan, and the fact Yida had never been officially recognized as a refugee camp, its inhabitants were to be relocated elsewhere. The Nuba refugees rejected relocation to Ajuong Thok and Pamir, however, arguing the two camps were too close to the border area controlled by the Sudanese government, and that at least Yida was close to SPLM-N authorities in the Nuba Mountains.

Despite these objections, the formal relocation process was eventually set in motion: in October 2019, UNHCR discontinued its food assistance in Yida, and two months later Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) stopped its medical services. By 2020, refugee schools had been left in the hands of the South Sudan state government, with water and sanitation handed over to local authorities and the refugee community.

During the course of 2020, just 2,758 Yida refugees were relocated to Pamir. Although children could continue to access free education in Pamir, the food ration there was halved from four to two *malwas* (gallons) of sorghum per person per month, further discouraging Yida refugees from resettling. The relocation has since led to a number of negative impacts for the refugees remaining at Yida, while those living in the two newer camps are also facing increasing hardship. Access to water has become more difficult, while clinical drugs are harder to find, forcing many to turn to herbal medicine.

Of particular concern when it comes to children is the loss of access to free education. Government school fees were initially set at USD 1 and USD 2 per term respectively for primary and secondary schools (based on three terms per school year). These fees have since increased to USD 3 and USD 5 respectively. Many parents, who are already struggling to provide enough food for their families, simply cannot afford these rates.

As a consequence, many children are now having to take up paid work or are leaving home to seek a better life, whether inside the camp or further afield, in Parieng, Liri, Rubkona or the Nuba Mountains.

Changing roles of refugee children

In the past, children living in the Nuba Mountains region would often be expected to participate in domestic tasks as a means of passing on necessary skills for later in life.**[5]** For instance, children with pastoralist parents would likely be involved in camel, goat, sheep, cow or donkey rearing, while the children of farmers might be given small plots of land to tend. Other household duties assigned to children included hunting, fishing and collecting wild fruits or firewood. Despite these responsibilities, children (those aged 5–17 years) still had sufficient time to play with their friends.

More recently, having a formal education has acquired greater importance, with most parents keen to ensure their children go to school. When the 2011 war erupted, many Nuba people migrated to South Sudan partly to ensure their children could continue to access a school education.

Today, however, children from poorer families are having to work not to acquire skills, but simply to earn money. One avenue of employment is bricklaying. This would previously have been viewed as man's work, but the pressures wrought by displacement, the war in Sudan and inflation in South Sudan mean women and children now have to engage in this often back-breaking work for meagre wages.

Another way in which children can make money is assisting Bagara nomads. In this scenario, the refugee parents agree to let the nomad take their child away for the purposes of helping graze their animals, sometimes for months on end. The child is paid a he-goat (worth about USD 100) for every month they work. The he-goats are usually then sold by the parents in order to buy sorghum to supplement the family's diet, or purchase shoes, medication and soap for other siblings. Having to spend months away from home inevitably means the children assisting the Bagara nomads must forego their education.

According to UNHCR refugee law, refugees are not supposed to return to their countries of origin or even leave the camp to travel to other parts of the host country. The growing difficulty of meeting daily needs has, however, driven many refugees to move to Liri (in Sudan) in search of farming jobs. Commercial farm owners in Liri offer reasonable wages, equivalent to about USD 5 per day. In this scenario, children mostly cross over to Liri with adults, siblings or friends who have

previously worked there. Older children (aged 12–17) are sometimes given accommodation by the commercial farm owners for the duration of their employment, following which they return to their camp and give the money they have earned to their parents. Alternatively, children may work alongside their parents before crossing back together.

Refugees arriving in Yida camp between 2011 and 2019 were provided with accommodation by UNHCR. Since then, however, refugees have had to build shelters themselves. In light of this, refugees—children included—have taken to collecting poles and grass from the nearby forest, which they then sell. Some are also involved in building structures for host community members, receiving the equivalent of USD 20 for each one they build. Other refugees have sought to make money by collecting firewood and making charcoal.

Again, tasks such were previously the preserve of adults, and only conducted by children for training purposes under the supervision of their parents. Now, financial imperatives mean it is commonplace for children, even younger ones, to take on these physically arduous tasks for money.

Impacts on children

As already touched upon, there are a number of negative implications to children in refugee camps undertaking paid work. Most obviously, they will have less time and energy to attend school or complete homework.**[6]** Thus, in attempting to meet short-term needs, they end up compromising their long-term futures, perpetuating the cycle of poverty endured by their families.

Children forced to spend long hours engaged in strenuous work also risk suffering serious physical and mental health issues.**[7]** Mental disorders such as depression and anxiety have become commonplace among children in Ajuong Thok, Pamir

and Yida camps, often—according to a focus group discussion with youths**[8]**—induced by injuries sustained through paid work and the lack of appropriate medication they receive afterwards.

In addition, many of the children who reside at their workplace end up sleeping without a mosquito net, rendering them susceptible to malaria and other chronic diseases.

Conclusion

Back when they used to live in the Nuba Mountains, children were almost entirely exempt from paid work. Now, the pressures of war, ongoing displacement, inflation, insufficient harvests and a lack of support from both the South Sudan government and international organizations mean refugee children—particularly those in Yida—must prioritize making money over pursuing an education.

If this state of affairs is to be reversed, then the government and NGOs must intervene to provide fully funded educational support to refugee children, especially those in direst financial need. In doing so, concerted efforts must be made to incentivize schooling over paid work.

The Author

Manal Abdulaziz Mudir is a Sudanese refugee from Nuba mountains region/ South Kordofan, who happened to flee from South Kordofan to South Sudan in 2014 to seek protection and education. In 2019, she was offered a Scholarship by UNHCR under Dafi at Catholic University of South Sudan and graduated in 2023 with Bachelor's in Conflict and Peace Studies. She then Joined Rift Valley Institute (RVI) as a cross-border researcher. Manal's research examined changing livelihoods, and the impact of the current Sudan war on the South Sudan-South Kordofan borderlands and in Ajoung and Pamir camps.

Acknowledgements

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International Development, XCEPT offers actionable research to inform policies and programmes that support peace, and builds the skills of local partners. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

This blog was edited by Ken Barlow.

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[2] UNHCR, 'South Sudan: Yida refugee settlement profile', 28 February 2020. Accessed 23 January 2025, **https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/74632 (https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/74632)**.

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[5] L. Aquila, 'Child Labour, Education and Commodification in South Sudan', Rift Valley Institute, 2022. **https://riftvalley.net/publication/child-labour-education-and-commodification-south-sudan/ (https://riftvalley.net/publication/child-labour-education-and-commodification-south-sudan/)**.

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[7] Anaclaudia Fassa et al., 'Child Labor and Health: Problems and Perspectives', International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health 6: 1 (2000), 55-62.

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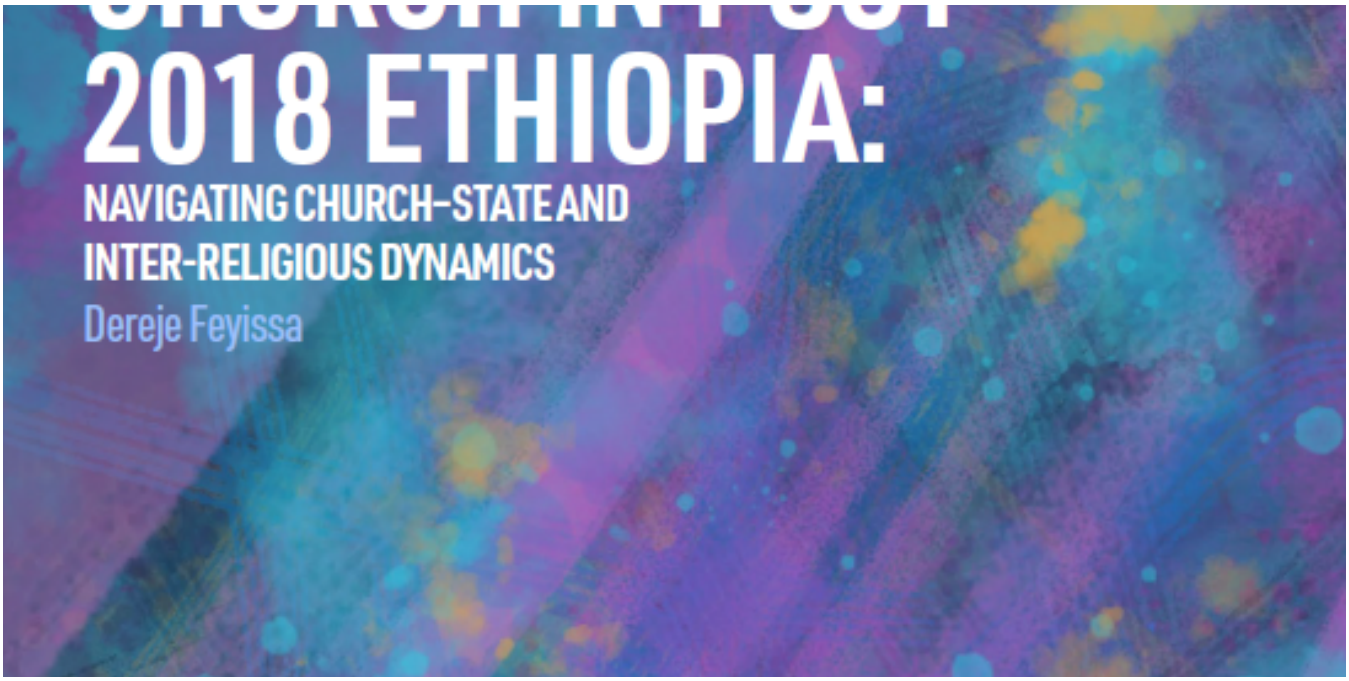

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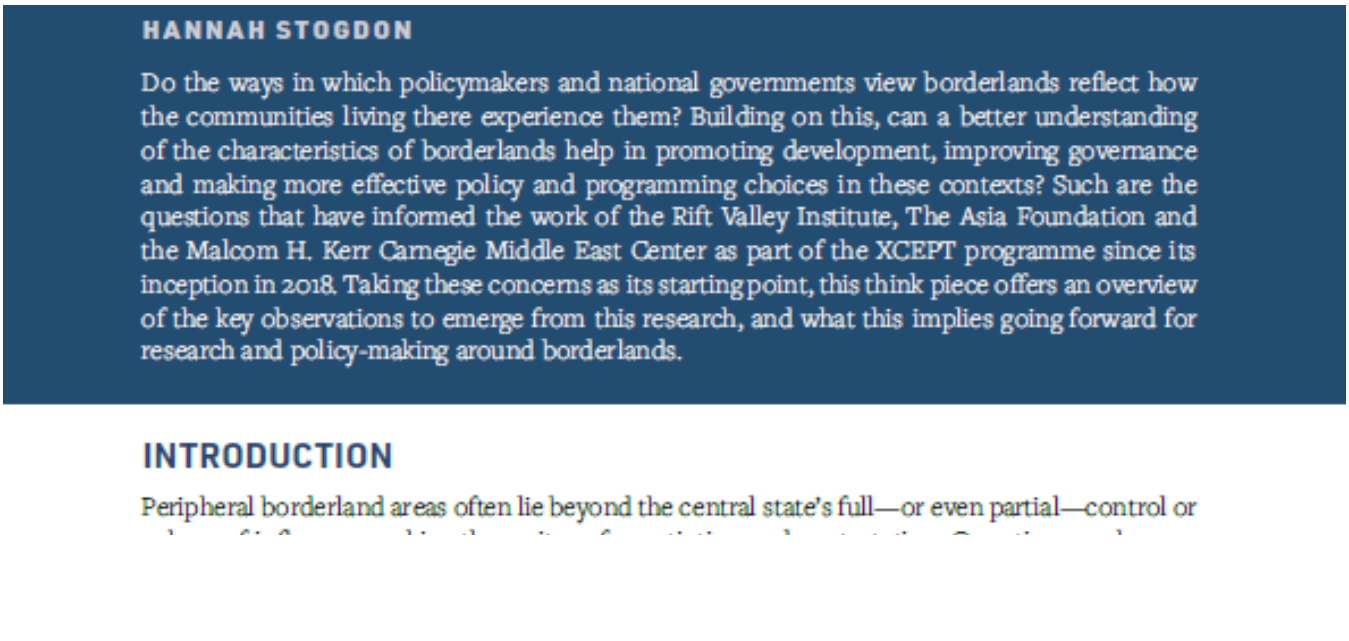
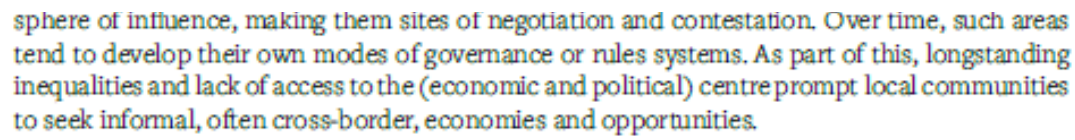

HANNAH STOGDON

Do the ways in which policymakers and national governments view borderlands reflect how the communities living there experience them? Building on this, can a better understanding of the characteristics of borderlands help in promoting development, improving governance and making more effective policy and programming choices in these contexts? Such are the questions that have informed the work of the Rift Valley Institute, The Asia Foundation and the Malcom H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center as part of the XCEPT programme since its inception in 2018. Taking these concerns as its starting point, this think piece offers an overview of the key observations to emerge from this research, and what this implies going forward for research and policy-making around borderlands.

INTRODUCTION

Peripheral borderland areas often lie beyond the central state's full—or even partial—control or


sphere of influence, making them sites of negotiation and contestation. Over time, such areas tend to develop their own modes of governance or rules systems. As part of this, longstanding inequalities and lack of access to the (economic and political) centre prompt local communities to seek informal, often cross-border, economies and opportunities.

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