

The London School of Economics and Political Science

**The labour of localisation: national NGOs and
the nature of work in South Sudan's
humanitarian arena**

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of Philosophy**

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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis examines the drivers behind and dynamics within South Sudan's 'NGO boom', and the growing role of South Sudanese NGOs in the international humanitarian system. It also explores labour dynamics and experiences of work in the humanitarian arena in South Sudan, with a particular focus on the lived experiences and life histories of those running and working for South Sudanese NGOs.

The study draws on ethnographic research, including in-depth life-work history interviews with the founders, directors, staff, volunteers and former staff of a wide range of South Sudanese NGOs. It traces people's journeys into and through the aid industry, exploring how and why people come to found and work for South Sudanese NGOs, their personal and professional histories and aspirations, and their experiences of working for and moving between national and international organisations and institutions. It sheds light on people's perceptions of organisational cultures, and of the potential for change in different spheres and spaces. It also examines the persistent inequalities and hierarchies in the international humanitarian system, as well as how people navigate these, and considers how NGO leaders and staff reflect on and grapple with the opportunities, tensions and constraints of their work.

The thesis argues for greater attention to the labour of aid, including the ways in which international agencies' approaches to working with and contracting domestic NGOs shape experiences and conditions of work within these organisations. It contributes to efforts to examine aid work *as a form of work*, and to understand working lives and conditions in the humanitarian sector. It speaks to recent debates on 'local labour' in the humanitarian industry, which have focused predominantly on the experiences of national staff within international organisations, rather than on the staff of domestic NGOs. It examines the interplay of precarity and privilege in this work, including the everyday uncertainties related to short-term, intermittent contracts and unpredictable salaries, and the pressure to stay employed in an increasingly competitive labour market. It also considers how NGOs and NGO employment relate to broader social and economic inequalities, and to shifting class dynamics, in South Sudan's changing political economy.

Finally, the thesis responds to calls for greater critical reflection on and academic scrutiny of the 'localisation agenda', including grounded empirical studies of how localisation is interpreted, contested, and plays out in practice in specific contexts. It seeks to historicise and contextualise

debates around localisation by tracing the history of ideas and initiatives intended to 'localise' aid across many decades of international humanitarian intervention in the region. It also examines the effects of the contemporary localisation agenda on the politics and practice of humanitarian action in South Sudan, and on power dynamics in the aid sector. The conclusion highlights implications for humanitarian policy and practice, and suggests recommendations for a deeper, more transformative approach to supporting locally led aid in South Sudan.

Abbreviations

C4C	Charter for Change
CAFOD	Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
CAHW	Community-Based Animal Health Worker
CAR	Central African Republic
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CHF	Common Humanitarian Fund
COMREF	Commissioner for Refugees
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CRRS	Cush Relief and Rehabilitation Society
CSRF	Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECHO	European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
EEC	European Economic Community
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
FEWSNET	Famine Early Warning Systems Network
FLIA	Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa
FTS	Financial Tracking Service
GHP	Global Humanitarian Platform
GTZ	German Agency for Technical Cooperation
HAC	Humanitarian Aid Commission
HLP	High-Level Panel
HNO	Humanitarian Needs Overview
HRP	Humanitarian Response Plan
IAHE	Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICBP	Institutional Capacity Building Programme
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IMF	International Monetary Fund

INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
L/NNGO	Local/National Non-Governmental Organisation
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
LSE	London School of Economics and Political Science
MDTF	Multi Donor Trust Fund
MoGSWRA	Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare and Religious Affairs
MoHEST	Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology
MoLACD	Ministry of Legal Affairs and Constitutional Development
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NESI	New Sudanese Indigenous Network
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NNGO	National Non-Governmental Organisation
NSCC	New Sudan Council of Churches
ODA	Overseas Development Aid
OFDA	The Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance
OLS	Operation Lifeline Sudan
POC	Protection of Civilians
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
RASS	Relief Association of South Sudan
R-ARCSS	Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan
RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SANU	Sudan African National Union
SCC	Sudan Council of Churches
SEOC	Sudan Emergency Operations Consortium
SINGO	Sudanese Indigenous NGO
SSCC	South Sudan Council of Churches
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SPLM/A	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army
SRRA	Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association

SRG	Southern Regional Government
SSHF	South Sudan Humanitarian Fund
SSLM	Southern Sudanese Liberation Movement
SSP	South Sudanese Pound
STAR	Sudan Transitional Assistance for Rehabilitation
SWVP	Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace
UN	United Nations
UN DHA	United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHAS	United Nations Humanitarian Air Service
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNMIS	United Nations Mission in Sudan
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar
VfM	Value for Money
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WCC	World Council of Churches
WFP	World Food Programme
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit

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1. Introduction

1.1. Chapter introduction

For half a century, the region that is now South Sudan¹ has been the site of large-scale international humanitarian operations, and a testing ground for trends in international humanitarian intervention (Deng et al., 2019). In the wake of the 1972 peace agreement that ended the first Sudanese civil war, it became one of the first places to see foreign-funded Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) becoming a preferred conduit for aid, with a large influx of international aid organisations taking on responsibility for service provision and emergency relief, and, in the process, undermining state authorities and sidelining voluntary organisations (Harrell-Bond, 1986; Tvedt, 1994; Ati, 1993). This pattern was repeated in many other parts of the African continent as neoliberal agendas and structural adjustment programmes took hold in the 1980s and 1990s (Jennings, 2008; Shivji, 2006). In 1989, in the context of the second Sudanese civil war and following a devastating famine in Bahr-el-Ghazal, southern Sudan became the site of the world's first large-scale, multi-lateral humanitarian programme involving negotiated access to civilians during a period of active conflict. This programme lasted for 16 years, and had far-reaching effects, both positive and negative, as extensively explored elsewhere (see Duffield et al., 2000; Efuk, 2001; Karim et al., 1996; Marriage, 2006; Maxwell et al., 2014).

South Sudan has also been the focus of seminal anthropological studies of humanitarianism, from Barbara Harrell-Bond's 1986 *Imposing Aid*, a pioneering study of UNHCR programmes which highlighted the flawed, paternalistic assumptions that aid must come from outside, and be managed by outsiders (Harrell-Bond, 1986), to De Waal's *Famine Crimes*, a critique of the powerful 'Humanitarian International,' dominated by an international elite involved in professionalising, institutionalising and de-politicising responses to famine, undermining political accountability while exercising its own, largely unaccountable, form of governance (De Waal, 1997). Studies such as these demonstrated the importance of studying the everyday realities of aid and of "*actually existing humanitarianism*" (De Waal, 1997: 4), and played a significant role in the development of the anthropology of humanitarianism, now a vibrant sub-discipline, as well as helping to spur more critical assessments of international humanitarian aid. Apthorpe (2014), for

¹ While imperfect, given the complexity of South Sudanese history and of national identities, I refer to Southern Sudan and Southern Sudanese for the period prior to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), and to South Sudan and South Sudanese for the subsequent period. The early 2000s saw a series of agreements, culminating in the 2005 CPA, which provided for self-government in the south, and led to the formation of an independent Government of South Sudan.

example, traces the growing field of ethnographically and anthropologically informed study of the international humanitarian project to the work of Harrell-Bond and de Waal in then-southern Sudan. Harrell-Bond's work in southern Sudan was also foundational to anthropological study of international responses to displacement (Ticktin, 2014), and to the field of refugee studies (Moro, 2022).

Yet, the aid industry in South Sudan has changed profoundly in the decades since these studies were written. In the mid-1990s, there were around 200 southern Sudanese employees of international aid organisations (Efuk, 2001), and a small but growing number of southern Sudanese NGOs. By 2019, there were an estimated 25,000 South Sudanese staff working in aid organisations in South Sudan, alongside 2,600 international staff (Mednick, 2019). The vast majority of aid workers in South Sudan are now South Sudanese, including some 92% of the staff of international NGOs (Ali et al., 2018), as well as the founders, directors, staff and volunteers of an array of South Sudanese NGOs that have emerged since the early 1990s. Particularly since the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), South Sudanese NGOs have proliferated rapidly, and have been drawn more firmly into the orbit of the international humanitarian industry, which is, for most, the primary source of external funding. These organisations have grown in size and prominence as a direct result of conflict since 2013, with international agencies increasingly relying on South Sudanese NGOs to deliver aid in parts of the country deemed risky, or 'hard-to-reach' (Hamsik, 2019). In addition, since 2016, 'localisation'² has become a prominent discourse in South Sudanese humanitarian arena, with growing pressure on international NGOs and United Nations (UN) agencies to work with and through South Sudanese organisations. This has not translated into any significant increase in *direct* funding for South Sudanese NGOs, but it does seem to have led to an increasing use of South Sudanese NGOs as subcontractors to international agencies.

Today, a growing proportion of humanitarian relief in South Sudan is delivered by South Sudanese NGOs. Precise figures on funding flowing to and through South Sudanese NGOs are hard to come by, in part, because of the opacity of the aid system: money flows from donors, through one or more intermediaries, to South Sudanese national NGOs and then, sometimes, on to smaller NGOs based in particular locales, and funding flows beyond first-level recipients are not tracked systematically. As one indication of scale, the number of national NGOs involved in

² 'Localisation' is a fraught and contested term, used and defined in many different ways (Barbelet et al., 2021). It is used here to refer to a cluster of commitments, reform processes and discourses broadly related to efforts to shift power and resources in the international humanitarian system to more 'local' actors, as discussed in [section 1.5](#).

the UN-coordinated humanitarian response in South Sudan has increased fivefold in the last decade. The 2014 crisis response plan for South Sudan – the first following the outbreak of conflict in 2013 – included 29 national NGOs (26%), alongside 71 international NGOs (63%) and 12 UN agencies (11%) (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), 2014). The number of national NGOs included in these plans rose to 40 in 2016 (35% of the total) (UN OCHA, 2015) and to 95 by 2019 (57%) (UN OCHA, 2018a). By 2023, 232 organisations were involved in providing relief through the UN-coordinated Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) in South Sudan, of which 144 (62%) were national NGOs, alongside 79 international NGOs (34%) and nine UN agencies (4%) (UN OCHA, 2023a).

These trends – including, particularly, the reliance on South Sudanese organisations for access to more remote and conflict-affected areas – have enabled some individual South Sudanese NGOs to grow exceptionally quickly, creating new humanitarian behemoths that now act as conduits for millions of dollars of aid funding annually. One organisation, founded in 2016, received their first grant that same year for 15,000 US dollars. By the close of 2017, their annual budget was 350,000 US dollars, and by 2021, it was 2.5 million US dollars. Another, founded in 2013, had a turnover of 9.3 million US dollars by late 2021, following years of exponential growth that the director attributes both to the outbreak of war and to his own intimate knowledge of the international humanitarian system. Many others exist on a much smaller scale, from newly formed NGOs to organisations and associations that have long histories and deep roots in specific areas, but that have struggled to access, or have been cautious about accepting, the resources of the international humanitarian industry.

South Sudanese NGOs are now active across all sectors of the international humanitarian response. They provide food, shelter and clean water, run hospitals and clinics, train and support teachers and health workers, facilitate peace meetings, run agricultural and livelihood programmes, and provide legal aid. They are involved in family tracing and reunification, and in managing camps for displaced people. They conduct assessments, write proposals and reports, participate in coordination meetings and increasingly lead or co-lead humanitarian clusters.³

³ Clusters are the main coordinating mechanism for international aid in humanitarian emergencies, introduced in 2005 as part of a major humanitarian reform process. They bring together different organisations, including UN agencies and NGOs. There are different clusters for different sectors: for example, for health, education, food security and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). There are clusters at global, national and sub-national levels, and all clusters have lead organisations and coordinators. They play an important role in shaping humanitarian interventions, including by generating and sharing information, conducting needs assessments, informing prioritisation exercises and influencing the allocation of resources. For more information, see UNHCR (2023).

Their social media profiles (like those of international NGOs and UN agencies in South Sudan) depict staff members in branded t-shirts wading through floodwater, unloading relief supplies from World Food Programme planes, and participating in conferences and workshops. Their websites display the logos of a wide range of international donors, and detail long lists of implemented projects. In various ways, they are centrally involved in the day-to-day ‘doing’ of humanitarianism in South Sudan.

The humanitarian landscape in South Sudan, then, has changed profoundly since the time these seminal ethnographies were written. In South Sudan, as elsewhere, the humanitarian industry cannot be understood through a focus on ‘hyper-mobile expatriates’ (Pascucci, 2019), living relatively separate lives from the rest of the population. Rather, in South Sudan, aid is to a significant degree enacted, negotiated and implemented by South Sudanese aid workers.⁴ This requires a significant rethinking and updating of anthropological and ethnographic work on the everyday lives, life histories, and labour conditions of aid workers, a shift that is already underway. Recent work in this area has drawn attention to what Pascucci (2019) describes as the ‘local labour’ building the international community: from local ‘techie’ aid workers employed by international organisations in the Philippines in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan (Ong & Combinido, 2018), to the relational labour of Congolese humanitarians working for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) (James, 2020, 2022), the stymied professional authority of locally contracted desk officers working for foreign donor agencies in Tanzania (Sundberg, 2019, 2020), and the precarious employment and unacknowledged affective labour of locally hired aid workers in Lebanon and Jordan (Pascucci, 2019).

This thesis contributes to this nascent body of literature, seeking to destabilise the figure of the expatriate aid worker and to centre the experiences, perspectives and positionalities of those working within their own countries and communities, who constitute the vast majority of aid workers, worldwide and in South Sudan. Yet, recent work in this area has focused predominately on locally contracted staff working *directly* for international organisations (see, e.g., Carruth, 2015; James, 2020; Ong & Combinido, 2018; Peters, 2016; Sundberg, 2020). This thesis, in contrast, focuses on a crucial yet under-researched and overlooked segment of the international humanitarian workforce: those individuals running or working for domestic NGOs, whose

⁴ While remaining ridden with racial hierarchies that continue to exclude South Sudanese staff from the most senior positions, and to relegate South Sudanese NGOs to a role as subcontractors, as discussed in this thesis.

labour is increasingly central to the everyday doing of humanitarianism in South Sudan. They engage in a form of *subcontracted humanitarianism*: although their participation in the aid industry is feted as a form of ‘localisation’, the work they undertake is, to a significant extent, determined by international NGOs, UN agencies and foreign donors, while the process of securing funding in an immensely competitive humanitarian marketplace places downward pressures on wages, and leads organisations to accept contracts that fail to cover the ‘real costs’ of humanitarian work in South Sudan. The result is a precarious labour industry characterised by short-term, intermittent contracts, low wages and unpaid and underpaid labour. The experiences of the employees of South Sudanese NGOs can be characterised as a form of what Wills (2009) describes as subcontracted employment, in which workers are somewhat disconnected from their ‘real’ employers: those who, to a significant extent, determine the conditions of employment. Through this focus on subcontracted humanitarianism, the thesis makes a distinctive contribution to the burgeoning body of literature on local labour in the humanitarian industry.

At the same time, to study South Sudanese NGOs solely through the lens of the international humanitarian industry would be wholly unsatisfactory. Though the bulk of available funding in South Sudan is broadly ‘humanitarian’ in nature, many NGO actors have goals and aspirations that go far beyond the provision of emergency relief. Founders and directors of South Sudanese NGOs often narrate profoundly political visions – to provide services, create jobs, build infrastructure, and, in various ways, contribute to ‘building’ South Sudan – while at the same time, carefully couching their work in a-political terms. The aid industry is a route through which people seek to create change, channel resources to their communities and enact political visions for South Sudan that they feel cannot be pursued elsewhere.

In addition, NGOs are bound up with processes of transformation in South Sudan in ways that extend far beyond their funded projects and programmes, and their stated goals and objectives. The aid industry has long been intimately embedded in South Sudan’s political economy (Jansen, 2017), and intertwined with struggles for power and influence. While expatriate aid workers may be, to some degree, sequestered and separated from the world immediately around them, living and working in ‘spaces of aid’ characterised by increasing securitisation and enclosure (Duffield, 2010; Smirl, 2015), those working for and running South Sudanese NGOs are inevitably socially and politically embedded in South Sudanese society, and variously positioned within South Sudan’s shifting class structures; all of which can be missed in a focus on South Sudanese NGOs exclusively for their position in the international humanitarian industry, or as the locus of

‘localisation’. NGOs can be powerful actors in local political economies, and founding or working for an NGO can be a route to personal, professional and political advancement, and upward social mobility. In a context of profound economic precarity, NGOs (both national and international) offer a rare source of salaried employment, and salaries are typically shared across extended networks of kin, becoming integrated into people’s survival strategies. Access to this employment is unevenly distributed, bound up with inequalities along the lines of geography, gender and class, including significant rural-urban divides, and has become a source of considerable contention. South Sudanese NGOs may be precariously positioned within the aid industry, but as providers of services and gatekeepers to scarce paid employment, they occupy a relatively powerful position in South Sudan’s political economy. A study of South Sudanese NGOs is therefore not only important for our understanding of ‘actually existing humanitarianism’, but also contributes to much-needed analysis of the shifting dynamics of power, inequality and class in South Sudan.

Finally, recognition of all this demands a far deeper, more nuanced approach to ‘localisation’ in South Sudan than that which is currently being pursued. That is, one that goes beyond highly prescriptive subcontracts and towards a more meaningful transfer of power and resources to South Sudanese actors, in a way that creates space for their ideas, visions and approaches, and that is sensitive to the ways in which the structure of funding influences the conditions of employment for those working within subcontracted organisations; but that also pays close attention to the ways in which the requirements of the international humanitarian system and the distribution of funding dictate *who* benefits from ‘localisation’, and how this relates to dynamics of inequality, marginalisation, and exclusion in South Sudan. Any discussion of ‘localisation’ in South Sudan also needs to be embedded in the long history of humanitarian intervention in the country, which has shaped the South Sudanese NGO arena in complex ways, and which has frequently been accompanied by rhetoric around strengthening, rather than supplanting, local capacities, actors and systems. In sum, the politics of ‘localisation’ in South Sudan are exceptionally fraught: bound up with the distribution of power, resources and influence in a highly resource constrained, unequal and politically fragmented environment, and bearing the weight of three decades of unkept and partially kept promises.

1.2. Aims of this research

This thesis interrogates the structural drivers behind and dynamics within South Sudan’s NGO boom. It examines the rapid proliferation of national NGOs in the country, and their

increasingly prominent role within the international aid industry. It explores the motivations and aspirations leading individuals to found or join South Sudanese NGOs, and to move between organisations, including between governmental and non-governmental agencies, and between international and national organisations. It examines the nature of work within the aid industry, and, in doing so, contributes to a small but growing literature on the experiences of locally hired aid workers within the international aid industry, which have so far focused particularly on national staff of international organisations (Ong & Combinido, 2018; Pascucci, 2019; Peters, 2016; Sundberg, 2020; Ward, 2021), as well as to long-standing debates on NGO professionalisation and de-politicisation, and on the dynamics of ‘NGO booms’ (Alvarez, 2009; Banks et al., 2015; Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Glasius & Ishkanian, 2015; Vetta, 2018).

The thesis also considers how NGO work relates to changing professional identities and aspirations in South Sudan, to class dynamics and to possibilities for upward socio-economic mobility. In the process, it speaks to, and seeks to complicate, existing debates around the relationship between NGOs and class (Hearn, 2007; Petras, 1999; Schuller, 2009), drawing into this discussion recent ethnographic, anthropological and geographic work on the lived experiences of the African middle classes as a shifting, heterogeneous category (see, *inter alia*, Durham, 2020; Khunou, 2015; Lentz, 2020; Mercer & Lemanski, 2020; Ndlovu, 2020).

The thesis does not seek to evaluate the effectiveness of South Sudanese NGOs’ activities or the impact of their projects and programmes, or to assess their advantages and limitations relative to international organisations. Such questions have already been much discussed elsewhere. Existing studies tell us that South Sudanese NGOs often provide ‘last-mile’ services, working in areas described as ‘hard-to-reach’, including places where international agencies have no presence, or are unwilling to work (CAFOD & Development Initiatives, 2023; Hamsik, 2019; Howe et al., 2019). South Sudanese NGOs tend to be seen as having better ‘access’ to populations in need, though access is often conflated with a willingness to accept risk, and the realities of access vary significantly between different organisations and locations (Hamsik, 2019; Moro et al., 2020). Some South Sudanese NGOs have a long-term presence in and deeply-rooted relationships amongst the communities where they work (CAFOD & Development Initiatives, 2023; Moro et al., 2020; Tanner & Moro, 2016), and remain “*credible agents of change and trust-builders locally*” (Diing et al., 2021: 48). Proximity to the intended ‘beneficiaries’ of aid can enable South Sudanese NGOs to respond to crises more quickly, in ways that are more locally-relevant and grounded in a longer-term perspective, potentially helping to improve the appropriateness,

effectiveness and sustainability of the humanitarian response (Howe et al., 2019; Tanner & Moro, 2016); though proximity can mean many different things, linked to the complex, relational notion of the ‘local’, and varies between organisations (Howe et al., 2019, Tanner & Moro, 2016; see also Roepstorff, 2019). Some studies suggest that local and national organisations in South Sudan can help improve the connections between humanitarianism, development and peacebuilding – in part, because the way they work already, intuitively, transcends these divides (Jayasinghe et al., 2020; Quack & Südhoff, 2020; Wilkinson et al., 2019).

Many of these studies examine the fraught and unequal integration of domestic NGOs into the international humanitarian industry in South Sudan. They highlight the deeply unequal nature of ‘partnerships’ between national and international organisations (Alcayna & Al-Murani, 2016; CARE, Christian Aid, Tearfund, ActionAid, CAFOD, Oxfam, 2019; Kiewied et al., 2020; Tanner & Moro, 2016), and the limited and shallow progress made in relation to various ‘localisation’ commitments (CAFOD & Development Initiatives, 2023; Els et al., 2020; Kiewied et al., 2020; Moro et al., 2020). They also point to an NGO sector that is heavily reliant on international donor support and oriented towards donor priorities and external agendas (Fenton et al., 2012; Luedke & Logan, 2018; Sørbo et al., 2016; Virk & Njanje, 2016). Some studies also highlight that much of the debate around ‘localisation’ in South Sudan is driven by ‘elite’ national NGOs, often those based in Juba, with connections to international organisations (Kiewied et al., 2020), and that the Juba-centric nature of the humanitarian system – combined with the equation of civil society with NGOs – has led to the expansion of Juba-based NGOs, while alienating many sub-nationally based organisations (Moro et al., 2020; Virk & Njanje, 2016).

There is much to be learned from these studies. However, there are also significant gaps. They tell us relatively little about the relationships between NGOs and wider South Sudanese politics and society, including their effects on and imbrication with everyday class politics. They tell us little about the dynamics *within* organisations, or about the individuals who staff them – including their histories, positionalities, motivations and aspirations. The position of interviewees within organisations is rarely stated, and so it is unclear how perspectives and experiences differ between staff members who are variously positioned within organisations. Finally, existing studies of South Sudanese NGOs and of ‘localisation’ are often relatively ahistorical, rarely engaging with South Sudanese history and political economy, with shifting structures of inequality, or with the history of international humanitarian intervention in the country, which

has long been accompanied by rhetoric around ‘building’ local capacity (as discussed in chapter three).

The focus of the thesis is both narrower and broader than in these existing studies. It is narrower in that it is primarily interested, not in South Sudanese NGOs as bounded organisations, but rather in the people within them: their personal and professional lives and identities, and their perspectives and lived experiences as social actors navigating both the hierarchies of the humanitarian industry and South Sudan’s changing political economy. It is also broader, in that it seeks to locate this discussion within wider structural dynamics of power, class and inequality, within and beyond South Sudan.

The thesis seeks to provide a historically grounded, nuanced and embedded ethnographic study of South Sudanese NGOs through a focus on the lives, life-histories and ‘life-worlds’ of those who lead and staff them. It asks: who *are* the founders and directors of South Sudanese NGOs? How do they come to found or run these organisations? What goals and aspirations do people pursue through the NGO form; and why do they feel establishing an NGO is the best way to achieve them? What kinds of capital and connections are required, and what sacrifices and compromises do they make to get organisations off the ground?

Moving beyond a focus on founders, the research is also concerned with the experiences and perspectives of those occupying varied positions within these organisations. It therefore asks, what is a South Sudanese NGO like as a place to work? What motivates people to work for them? What shapes their decisions to stay or leave? What does this tell us about dynamics and differences within and between organisations? What does all this tell us about the nature of work within the international humanitarian industry, including dynamics of hierarchy, inequality and precarity; and about shifting political and class dynamics in contemporary South Sudan?

To examine these questions, the thesis draws on life-work history interviews with the founders, leaders, staff, former staff and volunteers of a wide range of South Sudanese NGOs, conducted in four parts of the country, and including interlocutors from all ten South Sudanese states, as well as on observations of events, meetings and activities. It also draws on an extensive review of academic and grey literature, evaluations and other available material to trace changes over time, and on a small number of key informant interviews.

The next section provides a brief discussion of the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis. This is followed by a review of relevant literature, showing how the study is positioned within and contributes to existing research. The introduction concludes with a summary of the structure of the thesis.

1.3. Theoretical framings: Humanitarian aid as an arena

The thesis is grounded theoretically in a conceptualisation of humanitarian aid as an arena: a space in which diverse actors contest and negotiate the meanings, practices and outcomes of aid (Hilhorst, 2018a; Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010). This framework builds on a tradition of actor-oriented approaches to the study of aid and development (Long, 2001; Mosse, 2004), often associated with Norman Long and the Manchester School of Anthropology (Mosse & Lewis, 2006). At the heart of an actor-oriented approach is the premise that social actors have agency, that they operate within structural constraints but also construct and mediate those same constraints (Hilhorst, 2018a; Long, 2001). Long argues that it is ‘theoretically unsatisfactory’ to base one’s analysis on the concept of external determination; instead, one *begins* with an interest in “*explaining differential responses to similar structural circumstances, even if they conditions appear relatively homogenous*” (Long, 2001:13). This thesis is framed by an actor-oriented approach, with the aim of facilitating a nuanced engagement with the complexities and multiple realities of South Sudanese NGOs and the agency, perspectives, motivations and trajectories of those who staff them, while taking seriously the structural constraints within which they operate and which they, in turn, shape.

An actor-oriented approach is thus grounded in a social constructionist epistemology that understands people and their environments to be reciprocally constituted, and that is focused on the “*making and remaking of society through the ongoing self-transforming actions and perceptions of a diverse and interlocked world of actors*” (Long, 2001: 2). It has its roots in the work of earlier social scientists concerned with the dialectic between structure and agency, such as Giddens and Bourdieu, who sought, in reaction to earlier theories of structuralism and functionalism, to conceptualise the ‘articulations’ between the practices of social actors, and the broader ‘structures’ or ‘systems’ that both “*constrain those practices and yet are ultimately susceptible to being transformed by them*” (Ortner, 2006: 2; see also Giddens, 1984; Long, 2001; Hilhorst, 2018a). Methodologically, an actor-oriented approach demands “*detailed study of everyday life, in which actors seek to grapple cognitively, emotionally and organisationally with the problematic situations they face*” (Long, 2001: 51). However, it is explicitly and intentionally different from methodological individualism and rational actor theories (Long,

2001). It requires close attention to issues of structure, power, and history; ensuring that a focus on individual social agency does not replicate the limitations of early versions of practice theory,⁵ which “*desperately needed both history and a more elaborated sense of the play of power in social life*” (Ortner, 2006: 17).

From the perspective of humanitarian aid as an arena, aid is not the product of pre-defined policies and programmes, but of social negotiation by diverse actors in and around the aid chain, each with their own interests and interpretations of the situation (Hilhorst, 2018a). This approach recognises that the drivers of humanitarian action are multifaceted; as well as a desire to save lives and alleviate suffering, humanitarian action is invariably also shaped by political motivations and organisational politics (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010). It is an approach that recognises that there are “*always multiple realities and understandings of what is going on and what needs to be done*” (Hilhorst, 2018a: 31). Different actors develop their own understandings of and strategies around the “*vocabularies, ambitions and realities of aid*”, leading to frictions and contradictions in aid delivery (Hilhorst, 2018a: 31), and draw on varied discourses to advance their ideas or activities (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010). Crucially, it demands attention to the everyday lives of frontline aid workers and to the “*the lifeworlds of the humanitarians*” (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010: 1122): “*how they define and organize their work makes all the difference*” (ibid: 1122).

For the study of NGOs, an actor-oriented approach means going beyond normative questions of success and failure, and beyond assumptions about what an NGO is or does – considering, instead, the multiple perspectives and multiple realities (Hilhorst, 2003, 2007) at play in any one organisation. This means paying attention to diversity across and within organisations, to competing perspectives and discourses, to power relations, and to what organisations do through their everyday practices (ibid). Understanding NGOs as multiple realities means recognising that “*there is no single answer to the questions of what an NGO is, what it wants and what it does. NGOs are many things at the same time*” (Hilhorst, 2003: 3, emphasis in original). It means recognising that the vision of an NGO portrayed in proposals, reports and other organisational documentation is not the same as ‘real-life NGOs’ (Hilhorst, 2007), as viewed through their everyday practices, through the different ‘faces’ portrayed to different stakeholders or through the perspectives and experiences of different individuals, variously positioned within or around the organisation.

⁵ With practice theory understood as “*a general theory of the production of social subjects through practice in the world, and of the production of the world itself through practice*” (Ortner, 2006: 16).

Thus, instead of understanding organisations as static, bounded entities, Hilhorst (2003) proposes an understanding of organisations as ‘open-ended processes’. Understanding NGOs as *processes* rather than *things* leads us to ask, not what an NGO *is*, but rather how ‘NGO-ing’ is done (ibid). This perspective necessitates engagement with everyday practices, with social networks and with multiple, competing perspectives and realities. It means, Hilhorst writes, that

We must follow how NGO actors define the situation, choose their goals and find room for manoeuvre to realize projects. We must try to make sense of people’s motivations, ideas and activities by taking into account their past and present surroundings, social networks and histories. And we must observe the way they deal with the art of NGO-ing because this conveys practical knowledge, implicit interpretations and power processes taking place in such organisations. (Hilhorst, 2007: 300)

It is from this vantage point – with an understanding of NGOs as multiple realities, and with the importance of ‘starting from lived experience’ – that I engage with wider academic debates around NGOs, and around the nature of work in the aid industry and of life in ‘Aidland’. It is to these debates that I turn next.

1.4. Framing the thesis: a review of the literature

1.4.1. *The rise and rise of NGOs*⁶

The last five decades have seen a global ‘NGO boom’, driven by structural adjustment programmes,⁷ austerity and the rolling back of the state in many contexts, as well as by shifting donor preferences and trends in development and humanitarian assistance. Today, NGOs are a highly visible feature of most societies (Lewis & Schuller, 2017); they are “*bigger, more numerous and sophisticated, and receive a larger slice of foreign aid and other forms of development finance than ever*” (Banks et al., 2015: 707). For example, according to the Union of International Associations, cited by Lewis et al., the number of international NGOs increased from 6,000 in 1990, to more than 50,000 in 2006, to over 75,000 in 2018 (Lewis et al., 2020). South Sudan’s NGO boom needs to be situated within this wider, global proliferation of NGOs. This section briefly traces the history of the NGO form, in order to contextualise the chapters that follow. It then sketches key themes in academic research on NGOs and positions the thesis within this.

⁶ Some segments of this sub-section draw on an essay I wrote for the MRes course DV501 in 2018. However, they have been substantially rewritten, updated and expanded.

⁷ Structural adjustment programmes are economic reforms, often including privatisation, trade liberalisation, deregulation and reduced state spending, prescribed as a condition for receiving loans from international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank (Pfeiffer & Chapman, 2010).

NGOs are not new, though their rapid proliferation is a relatively recent phenomenon. The terminology of a ‘non-governmental organisation’ emerged from the 1945 UN Charter, as a designation awarded to organisations with consultative status in UN activities that were neither governments nor member states (Lewis et al., 2020); the designation ‘international NGO’ followed in 1950 to distinguish these organisations from specialised UN agencies established by international treaties (Kellow & Murphy-Gregory, 2018; Willetts, 2018). The history of NGOs is often traced back much further than this, though these histories depend to a significant extent on how one defines an NGO (see, *inter alia*, Davies, 2018; Kellow & Murphy-Gregory, 2018; Lewis et al., 2020; Lewis & Schuller, 2017), and there are very different NGO histories in different parts of the world (Lewis et al., 2020). The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the expansion of transnational NGOs; Charnovitz, for example, places the ‘emergence’ of NGOs in the late eighteenth century with the formation of ‘issue-oriented national NGOs’, including, first, anti-slavery societies, and some decades later, peace societies, and organisations mobilising around worker solidarity and free trade (Charnovitz, 1997). These organisations had transnational connections, held international congresses, and sought to influence international law. By the early twentieth century, NGOs “*organized to promote NGOs*” (ibid: 195), with the first World Congress of International Associations held in 1910. Davies similarly points to the expansion of specialised, internationally organised NGOs in the late eighteenth century, including anti-slavery societies and secular humanitarian organisations (Davies, 2018). NGOs were also intimately embroiled in the colonial project; the International African Association, for example, founded by King Leopold of Belgium, was “*putatively organized for philanthropic and scientific purposes, but soon pursued commercial and political goals*”, and “*transmogrified from an NGO-like entity into the Congo State*” (Charnovitz, 1997: 198). More broadly, the colonial period saw an influx of transnational NGOs to the African continent, including relief and development organisations, religious institutions, private foundations, international NGOs and others (Aina, 2013; Obadare & Krawczyk, 2022). Donations provided by growing middle classes in colonising countries enabled “*faiths and non-profit and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) across Africa and elsewhere to globalise social welfare as a non-state system*” (Fowler & Mati, 2019: 731).

By the end of the colonial period, non-state activity in empire, including through charities and churches, was well-established (O’Sullivan, 2021). In the 1950s and 1960s, NGOs, in many ways, “*simply replaced those entities as the ‘acceptable’ face of intervention in the Third World*” (ibid: 9), with direct continuities in personnel, including missionaries and former colonial officials, as well as in discourses, images and practices (O’Sullivan, 2021; see also Kothari, 2006), and ideological

continuities about ideas of development and ‘progress’ carried over from colonial thinking to the emerging aid industry (O’Sullivan, 2021; Yarrow & Venkatesan, 2012). From the 1960s, international humanitarian and development NGOs expanded, becoming the *“primary conduits of Western compassion for the global poor”* (O’Sullivan, 2021: 2). These organisations, O’Sullivan suggests, *“should also be viewed as part of an entangled history of the humanitarian impulse that manifested in the pursuit of ethical capitalism, humanitarian internationalism, refugee relief, imperial welfare, rationalised modes of aid delivery and a broader moral economy of relief”* (ibid: 4).

It was in the 1980s, however, that the number of NGOs worldwide skyrocketed, with much of this growth taking place in the ‘Global South’ (Brass et al., 2018; Jennings, 2008). This was driven by numerous, intersecting trends. Central amongst these was the rise of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is a political and economic movement and ideology that propounds the benefits of individual entrepreneurial freedoms enabled by free markets, privatisation and deregulation (Harvey, 2005). It is an ideology that *“holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and... seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market”* (ibid: 3), and is often associated with an ethos of individualism and competition (Davies, 2014) in which the role of the state is to guarantee private property, free markets and the rule of law (Harvey, 2005). NGOs have often been critics of neoliberal policies and ideologies, but have also benefited from the rise of neoliberalism as a dominant global ideology. The 1970s saw significant shifts in the imagined role of the state in development, with interventionist theories such as welfare economics and Keynesianism that accorded an active role to the state giving way to a neoliberal discourse in which the state was to be seen as *“an organisation run by self-seeking politicians and bureaucrats”* (Chang, 2002: 540). By 1981, Shivji writes, *“according to the World Bank, the villain of the declining economic performance in Africa was the state”* (Shivji, 2006: 33). As the prevailing zeitgeist shifted away from the state and towards private actors, the role of NGOs in development expanded substantially, celebrated precisely for their identity as non-governmental (Lewis, 2002). At the same time, structural adjustment programmes were hollowing out the state in many parts of Africa and Latin America, forcing drastic cutbacks to services, increasing poverty and inequality and undermining economic growth (Jennings, 2008; Manji & O’Coill, 2002; Mkandawire, 2005; Sandberg, 1994), creating a space into which NGOs could move (Jennings, 2008; Sandberg, 1994).

The 1980s also saw growing disillusionment with the effects of top-down, state-led, centralised approaches to development of preceding decades, with authors arguing, for example, that

“development was - and continues to be for the most part - a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach” (Escobar, 1995: 44). NGOs were both drivers and beneficiaries of the search for alternatives, including more ‘participatory’ approaches (Chambers, 1994; Lewis et al., 2020). As these ideas were absorbed into the development mainstream, NGOs were increasingly celebrated as actors that could facilitate more ‘bottom-up’, ‘people-centred’, participatory approaches, assumed as they were to be closer to the intended ‘beneficiaries’ of development (see, e.g., United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 1990, 1993; for a discussion, see Lewis, 2005; Lewis et al., 2020). NGOs, in sum, came to be seen as a panacea for the ills of the development industry, while resonating with the ideologies of an ascendent neoliberalism. As a result, they began to receive a rapidly-growing share of development resources: overseas development aid (ODA) channelled to NGOs for development increased 310% between 1975 and 1988 (Fowler, 1991), for example.

By the 1990s, challenges to the neoliberal development paradigm were emerging. Given the failures of structural adjustment and liberalisation, and in the face of increasing resistance, a ‘revisionist neoliberalism’ emerged, conceding a greater role for the state (Mohan & Stokke, 2000). The idea of ‘good governance’ rose to prominence, which posited that the state, business and third sector needed to work in balance (Lewis et al., 2020). With the good governance agenda came a growing emphasis on civil society as a check on and complement to the market and government, a logic embraced by donors in the 1990s (ibid). This rested on a liberal, normative and instrumentalised vision of civil society as a democratising force, and of NGOs, in turn, as promoters of (or equivalent to) civil society, further cementing their centrality to development (Jennings, 2008; Mercer, 2002). These ideas were promulgated not just by donors and NGOs themselves, but by a growing body of academic literature. NGOs were said to pluralise the institutional arena, to work with grassroots organisations and thus deepen possibilities for citizen participation, and to check state power (see Mercer, 2002, for a review of this literature). Thus, in addition to the view that NGOs were cost-efficient, effective, and ‘closer to the poor’, they came to be seen as essential to a thriving civil society, and a counterweight for state power (Edwards & Hulme, 1996), and came to be *“favoured both as vanguards of civil society and as more dependable partners [than states] in economic and social development”* (Laird, 2007: 470). As Vetta (2018: 35) writes, despite an abundance of critique, civil society remains a *“development fetish”*, to be supported through foreign aid, with notions of ‘building civil society’ still often meaning *“forming local NGOs and raising their capacities”*; NGOs are thus today, both *“a means and a goal of development intervention”* (ibid: 36).

Largely because of these trends, the number of NGOs around the world, and the share they receive of overseas development assistance, have grown rapidly. In 2000, NGOs were estimated to be disbursing between twelve and fifteen billion US dollars per year (Bernal & Grewal, 2014); by 2014, this number was around 60 billion US dollars (Lewis et al., 2020). By 2018, nearly 90% of World Bank financed projects involved the participation of an NGO or civil society organisation, compared to 21% in 1990, and almost 20% of bilateral aid flows through NGOs (Brass et al., 2018). International donor funding has helped fuel ‘NGO booms’, at different times and in different ways, in different parts of the world. For example, the number of NGOs increased from 611 in 1993 to 14,880 in 2016 in Kyrgyzstan (Bayalieva-Jailobaeva, 2018), and from less than 100 in 1991 to close to 1,400 in 2012 in Cambodia (Khieng & Dahles, 2015). In Ghana, there were ten registered NGOs in 1960, 350 by 1990s, 3,000 by 2004 (Laird, 2007) and over 6,000 by 2014 (Arhin, 2016).

1.4.2. NGOs beyond ‘NGO-isation’

The impact of these trends has been extensively analysed, with NGOs becoming an immensely popular topic for research. Brass et al., in their recent literature review on NGOs, included 3,300 journal articles (Brass et al., 2018). An initially positive scholarly literature on NGOs has long since given way to more critical perspectives (Lewis & Schuller, 2017), linking the rise of NGOs to the expansion of neoliberalism, the hollowing out of states in the face of structural adjustment, austerity and privatisation (see, *inter alia*, Kamat, 2004; Kothari, 1986; Leve & Karim, 2008; Schuller, 2009; Shivji, 2006; Wright, 2012), and the co-optation and sanitisation of civil society through ‘NGO-isation’ (Alvarez, 1999; Atia & Herrold, 2018; Chahim & Prakash, 2014). This growing body of critique has done little to dampen enthusiasm for NGOs and civil society in the development industry, and NGOs worldwide continue to proliferate (Lewis & Schuller, 2017).

An extensive body of literature explores themes of NGO-isation and de-politicisation, arguing that, through donor funding, organisations become professionalised and bureaucratised, distanced from their members and mandates, and incentivised to focus on short-term projects and service delivery over longer-term change (Atia & Herrold, 2018; Banks et al., 2015; Edwards & Hulme, 1996). Linked to this, the challenge of NGOs’ multiple accountabilities has been much discussed, including the pressures to prioritise ‘upward’ accountability to donors over accountability to an organisation’s members, intended ‘beneficiaries’, staff, or to its own mission

(Chahim & Prakash, 2014; Ebrahim, 2003; Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Mir & Bala, 2015). Writing in 1996, for example, Edwards and Hulme cautioned that increased external funding to NGOs as service providers would weaken their legitimacy as ‘independent actors in society’, distort their accountability away from their constituencies, and lead them to prioritise short-term, quantitative outputs (Edwards & Hulme, 1996). In a detailed review article published nineteen years later, summarising an extensive body of research, Banks, Edwards and Hulme largely confirm their earlier conclusions, writing that most NGO efforts remain “*palliative rather than transformative*”: the result of various factors, including their often-weak roots in civil society in the countries where they work and generate resources, the rise of technocracy, and the challenges posed by increasingly repressive political environments (Banks et al., 2015). Similar conclusions about the pervasive power of professionalisation and de-politicisation are found in numerous case studies. Atia and Herrold, for example, argue that foreign aid and government funding has depoliticised NGOs in Morocco and Palestine through technologies of professionalisation, bureaucratisation and upward accountability, undermining their potential as agents of change and leading to crises of legitimacy (Atia & Herrold, 2018).

Scholars working in the field of critical management studies have also pointed to the pervasive influence of managerialism on NGOs. Managerialism can be understood as an ideology in which management thinking is “*portrayed as a neutral and objective science, coupled with confidence in its potential and actual contribution to progress and prosperity*” (Girei, 2016: 194), and as a “*powerful behavioural logic shaping a range of processes and outcomes of governance*” (Eagleton-Pierce & Knafo, 2020: 764). Development management orthodoxy, with its focus on results-based management, performance measurement and value for money, is argued to orient NGOs away from long-term social transformation and towards short-term service delivery (Girei, 2023), and to entrench inequalities between Northern and Southern NGOs, increasing pressure on Southern-based NGOs to adopt specific management tools and techniques, such as logframes and project cycle management, which “*despite the rhetoric of partnership... are hardly ever negotiable*” (Girei et al., 2022: 105-106).

Recently, anthropologists have engaged critically *both* with normative visions of NGOs as the ‘sine qua non’ of civil society on the one hand, and with narratives of de-politicisation, co-optation and NGO-isation on the other. They have done this through efforts to unpick ‘NGOs’ as a supposedly unitary category (Lewis & Schuller, 2017), and through the grounded study of everyday practices of NGOs in specific contexts (see, e.g., Décobert, 2016; Hilhorst, 2003; and

contributors to Bernal & Grewal, 2014). Alvarez, for example, whose 1999 article on the feminist 'NGO boom' in Latin America represented an influential critique of the perils of 'NGO-isation' and its tendency to depoliticise and co-opt feminist agendas, cautioned ten years later that blanket assessments of NGOs as 'handmaidens of neoliberalism' obscured important ambiguity and variation within and between organisations, and overlooked the important movement-building work of many NGOs (Alvarez, 1999, 2009).

Hodžić also critiques what she calls the 'NGO-ization paradigm' in relation to feminist organising, which, she suggests, *"does not simply refer to the boom in NGOs, but understands this phenomenon as harmful for feminism"* through the depoliticization and neoliberal co-optation of women's movements. The NGO-ization paradigm, she argues, is based on a 'closed circuit' of truth claims that has constrained the space for analysis and critique, often drawing on a romanticised and nostalgic vision of earlier women's movements, and on an unhelpful binary opposition that positions NGOs and movements as antithetical to one another. Amongst other things, this paradigm obfuscates actual power relations, as well as the ways in which some NGOs *"transgress boundaries and produce new kinds of political engagements, however tentative and fraught"* (Hodžić, 2014: 232). She suggests, instead, that *"we would be better served by neither dismissing NGOs nor celebrating movements, but by examining the articulation of their forms, as well as their blind spots and productive possibilities"* (ibid: 244).

Through grounded studies, researchers have explored the nuances and cracks in processes of NGO-isation, professionalisation and de-politicisation, highlighting the complex entanglements, crossovers and collaborations between professional NGOs, activists and social movements (see, *inter alia*, Alvarez, 2009; Glasius & Ishkanian, 2015; Mosse & Nagappan, 2021; Waghmore, 2012). Researchers have explored, for example, 'surreptitious symbiosis' between professional NGOs and activists involved in street protests and direct action in Athens, Cairo, London and Yerevan, taking place largely 'below the radar' (Glasius & Ishkanian, 2015), the 'movement work' of NGOs in Latin America (Alvarez, 2009), and alliances between NGOs and Dalit social movements in India that, rather than resulting in 'depoliticisation', helped bring Dalit rights to the centre of local politics (Waghmore, 2012). Research has also explored nuances in and resistances to dynamics of upward accountability and donor dependency. Studies have highlighted, for example, the ways in which organisations resist donor pressures and make space for their own agendas, perhaps by providing information to donors symbolically and selectively while buffering core activities from external influence (Ebrahim, 2002), drawing on prevailing

development discourses to legitimise their work without changing their activities (Ebrahim, 2001), refusing misaligned funding and staying small strategically, or rechanneling resources to activities to which they are committed, but which may be unfashionable and hard to fund (Townsend et al., 2004). Research has also highlighted not only the pervasive impact of managerialism on NGOs around the world, but also the ways in which this is debated, negotiated and resisted: from open contestation with donors to hidden resistance, as well as through the production of a ‘bifurcated identity’, in which paperwork, conforming to management and accountability systems, is detached from day-to-day practice (Girei, 2023).

The point of all this is not to argue that NGOs are somehow either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but rather to emphasise the importance of studying them in context, in ways that engage with everyday politics and everyday practice. Part of the challenge of drawing conclusions about NGOs is that the label itself is so imprecise, covering an array of vastly different organisations and entities, and lending itself easily to over-generalisation. As noted several decades ago, “*almost anything that one can say about [NGOs] is true – or false – at least in some instance, somewhere*” (Esman and Uphoff, 1984; cited in Najam, 1996). At the most general level, the term ‘NGO’ defines organisations by what they are not – it is a residual category, ostensibly identifying an entity that is neither state nor market (Bernal & Grewal, 2014; Lewis & Schuller, 2017; Najam, 1996). It is through this distinction from the state and market that NGOs – diverse, innumerable, heterogeneous – have come to be seen as a “*unified phenomenon*” (Bernal & Grewal, 2014: 6): as a residual category or negative form, the ‘NGO’ label covers a plethora of organisations that may in other ways bear little resemblance to one another. Yet, as Bernal and Grewal (2014) highlight, even this basic designation is deceptive, since NGOs intersect and overlap with governments and states in innumerable, complex ways.

Rather than attempting to ‘fix’ any particular definition or category of ‘NGO’, Lewis and Schuller suggest that the instability of the category is *itself* productive. Because of this ‘productive instability’, NGOs “*can represent entry points for understanding blurred boundaries between state and market and state and society*” (Lewis & Schuller, 2017: 641). One way in which to do this is to focus on the experiences of ‘boundary crossing’ professionals. Lewis develops the concept of boundary crossing across a series of articles to explore the movement of individuals between governmental and non-governmental organisations (Lewis, 2008b, 2008a, 2010, 2011, 2013). As Lewis (2011) articulates, the boundary between the governmental and non-governmental ‘sectors’ is imagined and constructed; it is an idea and a metaphor that serves to organise an institutional landscape.

Yet, it is also experienced by people as ‘real’ in many ways, from laws that require separation of businesses, government and NGOs, to the different organisational cultures that are reproduced in different settings (Lewis, 2010). The notion of the boundary between the governmental and non-governmental as *both* an idea and a system, Lewis argues, makes it “*well-suited for investigating ethnographically*” (ibid: 5).

Drawing on life-work history interviews in Bangladesh, the Philippines and the UK, Lewis shows how various boundaries (including, for example, between the public, private and ‘third’ sectors; and governmental and non-governmental spheres) are made and re-made, and repeatedly ‘crossed’, through people’s career histories and social relationships (Lewis, 2008a, 2011). Studying the career histories of these boundary-crossing professionals helps shed light on experiences of working in both the governmental and non-governmental sectors, and on the ambiguity and (relative) porosity of the boundary between them (Lewis, 2010). It also provides insights into changing aspirations and the “*complexities of professional identities*” (Lewis, 2011: 193).

In Bangladesh, for example, life-work histories highlight the declining prestige of the civil service relative to NGOs, with the latter offering university graduates the opportunity to work flexibly in roles that combine professional, consultant and activist identities, as well as higher salaries (Lewis, 2010). In the Philippines, movement of individuals from NGOs into government was more common, linked to a desire to pursue reform agendas from ‘within’, particularly during moments of political flux, such as following the end of the authoritarian Marcos regime in 1986 (Lewis, 2013). Efforts to create change from the ‘inside’, however, could lead to disappointment and disillusionment, while the porosity of the boundary led to allegations of co-optation into patronage politics, and to a perception of NGOs as steppingstones for advancing political careers (ibid). Other reasons for crossing between sectors included a search for more interesting work, improved security and status, and an effort to build a varied career (Lewis, 2008a). In the UK, Lewis (2008b) highlights the regularity of ‘cross-over’ between the government and the third sector, through job changes and secondments. Cross-over may be shaped by disillusionment in one sector or the other, a desire for a better salary, a search for work perceived to be more fulfilling, an opportunity to learn, a desire for greater influence, or a change in government leading to exit to the third sector (ibid). In sum, each set of life-work histories reveals a ‘complex bundle’ of motivations, aspirations and circumstances influencing people’s decisions about where to work and when to move between organisations or sectors (Lewis, 2010, 2011).

This thesis seeks to contribute to this literature with an ethnographically grounded study of South Sudanese NGOs, through a focus on the life-work histories of their founders, directors and staff. The life-work history approach enables the study to look beyond any one organisation, and beyond the relative youth of many South Sudanese NGOs, examining instead complex personal and professional histories and identities which involve frequent ‘boundary crossing’ between different organisations, as well as between ostensibly separate governmental and non-governmental spheres. The aim is to focus on “NGOs as *made up of individuals with particular histories, commitments and allegiances, rather than monolithic and unified entities*” (Baillie Smith & Jenkins, 2012: 643). This links us back to the actor-oriented approach set out above, and to the understanding of NGOs as open-ended processes rather than fixed, static or bounded entities (Hilhorst, 2003). It is here that research on NGOs dovetails with work on the everyday lives, motivations and perspectives of people working within the humanitarian and development industries, to which I turn next.

1.4.3. On people in aid, and the rise of ‘aidnography’

The thesis is grounded in and speaks to a body of research focusing on the people within the humanitarian industry, and the personal and professional dimensions of aid work (Fechter, 2012; Fechter & Hindman, 2011; Heathershaw, 2016; Malkki, 2015; Mosse, 2011; Roth, 2015a, 2015b), through which anthropologists have studied the biographies, motivations, subjectivities, experiences and ‘life-worlds’ of aid professionals. This growing body of literature has emerged primarily over the last two decades. Some studies position themselves within the anthropology of humanitarianism (Feldman, 2007; Malkki, 2015) and others in the anthropology of development (Fechter & Hindman, 2011; Heathershaw, 2016; Mosse, 2011b), speaking to each other to varying degrees, while others bridge the two (Roth, 2015b). What unites these studies, broadly, is an interest in the social and cultural lives of aid professionals: “*their class position, biographies, commitments and anxieties*” (Mosse, 2011: 14).

This work can be situated, broadly, within the field of ‘aidnography’ (Gould, 2004), through which anthropologists have engaged in the ethnographic study of aid workers and aid organisations, and of life in ‘Aidland’ (Apthorpe, 2011; Mosse, 2011a). This field emerged, in part, in response to critical approaches to the anthropology of development that had predominated in the 1980s and 1990s. Often drawing on Foucauldian approaches, these critiques analysed development as a discourse, a technology of (disguised) power and a form of

governmentality (see Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994 for examples; and Mosse, 2013; Yarrow & Venkatesan, 2012 for discussion). These critical approaches were, and remain, “*hugely significant in bringing to light the mechanisms by which the industrialized ‘West’ has continued to exercise control over processes of global change in a postcolonial world*” (Yarrow & Venkatesan, 2012: 3). Yet, as anthropologists began to argue, they were also heavily theoretical, obscuring the actual, everyday practices and politics of aid, and the beliefs, meanings, actions and perspectives of development actors themselves (Mosse, 2004a, 2004b; Yarrow & Venkatesan, 2012). Mosse (2004b: 644), for example, argued that the critical turn in the anthropology of development was an “*ethnographic blind alley*”, diverting attention away from “*the complexity of policy as institutional practice, from the social life of projects, organizations and professionals and the diversity of interests behind policy models and the perspectives of actors themselves*”. As Smirl (2015) notes, aid workers themselves were largely omitted, except as part of institutional processes and pathologies.

By the mid-2000s, a ‘new ethnography of development’ was emerging that was “*distinctly uncomfortable with monolithic notions of dominance, resistance, hegemonic relations*” (Mosse, 2004b: 645), and that called, instead, for a (re)turn to grounded ethnographic studies of aid, engaging more explicitly with everyday practice (Long, 2001). For example, Norman Long’s actor-oriented approach to development, introduced above, emphasised the importance of “*starting from ‘lived experience’*”, looking beyond ‘myths’ and ‘models’ of development, and instead engaging ethnographically with the varied perspectives, practices and ‘life-worlds’ of diverse actors involved in and around any development intervention (Long, 2001). Ethnographers began to ask, not whether, but *how* development projects work, and how success is produced (Mosse, 2004a); how variously located social actors are involved in contesting and shaping the meanings and outcomes of development projects (Long, 2001); how development projects and discourses are transformed by local project staff and by the intended ‘recipients’ of aid to better suit their own needs (Rossi, 2006) and how refugees outmanoeuvre powerful and wealthy aid agencies, ‘cheating’ the system in various ways (Kibreab, 2004). The anthropology of humanitarianism has been on a similar journey, from embrace, to critique and denunciation of humanitarianism as a transnational project that depoliticises structural issues of inequality and injustice, and then to more cautious, ethnographic explorations of its complexities and nuances (Ticktin, 2014).

Initially, much of this work focused on aid institutions, policies and projects, with aid workers themselves viewed primarily “*in the role of translators of cosmopolitan policy to local conditions*” (Hindman & Fechter, 2011: 12; see also Stirrat, 2008). Over time, however, who aid workers *are*, how they

live, and how they interpret and approach their work, came to be seen as an increasingly important topic of research. This is exemplified by Thomas Yarrow's ethnography of Ghanaian NGO founders and activists (Yarrow, 2011), and by two edited volumes published in 2011: Fechter and Hindman's *Inside the Everyday Lives of Development Workers* and Mosse's *Adventures in Aidland* (Fechter & Hindman, 2011; Mosse, 2011a). By 2013, research on life in what Raymonde Apthorpe allegorically termed '*Aidland*' – a 'parallel universe' with "*its own mental topographies, languages of discourse, lore and custom, and approaches to organizational knowledge and learning*" (Apthorpe, 2011: 199) – had become a genre and trope in and of itself (Harrison, 2013), spawning a significant body of further research, including applications to 'Peaceland' (Autesserre, 2014). At the core of such work has been a concern with the 'everyday' of aid intervention: with the practices, habits and relationships of interveners, and how these intimately shape the ways in which any aid intervention plays out in practice (Autesserre, 2014). This dovetails with anthropological scholarship on humanitarianism in practice, on the social lives of humanitarians, on the complexities, contradictions and dilemmas of their work, and on what it means to be a 'humanitarian' (e.g. Feldman, 2007; Malkki, 2015; Roth, 2015b; Smirl, 2015). Anthropological scholarship has also examined the "*multifaceted aspects of humanitarians' institutional lives, from their bureaucratic process to how their ethical principles play out*", through ethnographic studies of some of the largest international aid agencies (Ticktin, 2014: 279; for examples, see, *inter alia*, Bornstein, 2001, 2003; Fassin, 2007; Redfield, 2013; and contributors to Bornstein & Redfield, 2011). Ethnographic work has sought to unpack imaginaries of the aid worker as an "*always already worldly, generically cosmopolitan, globally mobile figure*", and as a 'humanitarian subject', "*characterized by a desire to help*" (Malkki, 2015; see also Hindman & Fechter, 2011), highlighting instead the heterogeneity of those working in aid (Hindman & Fechter, 2011) and the complexity and multiplicity of their aspirations and motivations (Malkki, 2015; Roth, 2015).

One important insight from this literature is of the need to look beyond the presumed benevolence of aid workers, and to examine aid work as a form of *work*. Hindman and Fechter (2011), for example, call for an examination of the labour of aid through ethnographic accounts of aid workers' everyday lives, including how the aid profession, like others, has been shaped by processes of fragmentation, outsourcing and subcontracting, how aid workers balance their personal and professional lives, and the emotional and immaterial labour that is demanded of them. Across a series of articles, Fechter has called for renewed attention to the intertwining of the personal and professional dimensions of aid work, emphasising that aid workers' personal relationships, values, beliefs and attitudes impact the outcomes of aid (Fechter, 2012b, 2012a), as

well as to the moral entanglements that aid workers have to negotiate, representing a form of ‘moral labour’ (Fechter, 2016). Fechter theorises the moral labour of aid workers as a form of immaterial labour – labour which is expected but often unrecognised, and the products of which are intangible – including, in the case of aid work, a sense of being engaged in ‘impossible missions’, and of being prevented from doing what they think is right by the policies of their own organisations (ibid). More broadly, as Mosse summarises, anthropological literature has increasingly sought to “*get behind heroic or cynical representations to the social conditions of overseas aid labor (the effects of hypermobility, visibility, interstitial positions, audit pressures, worker failure, gender roles, and racialized relations)*” (Mosse, 2013: 235; see also Roth, 2015b, and contributors to Fechter and Hindman, 2011).

Ethnographic studies of the spatiality, materiality and sociality of international aid work have yielded other important insights, including the propensity for international aid workers to live and work in ‘bubbles’, partially delinked from local circumstances (Allen, 2015; Smirl, 2015), enabling a degree of ‘cognitive dissonance’ that can have profound implications for their work (Marriage, 2004). Lisa Smirl’s seminal work (2008, 2015) argued for greater attention to the built and material environment of the international aid community, and how this shapes the practices and perspectives of interveners, as well as relationships between those who are assisting and those who are being assisted. International intervenors, through their spatial and material practices, contribute to and operate in a kind of ‘auxiliary space’, which is “*effectively delinked from local circumstances*” (Smirl, 2015: 203). These spaces are created physically, epitomised in the built form of the walled and gated compound, the SUV and the ‘grand hotel’, but also through the practices and performances of international aid workers, including rapid staff turnover and short-term contracts, and a tendency to socialise amongst one another and to visit the same small set of bars and restaurants. These ‘spaces of aid’ are characterised by increasing securitisation and enclosure, by a differential mobility and temporality from their surroundings, and by a sense of exceptionalism; they may be more closely networked to their ‘spaces of origin’ than to their proximate physical environments, with working lives, rhythms and priorities oriented towards their donors and headquarters, often in the global north. From these bounded spaces, aid workers interact with ‘beneficiaries’ in increasingly securitised and ritualised ways, which shapes and limits their understandings of the world around them, and the design of their projects and programmes (Smirl, 2015).

This has important implications for the practice and outcomes of aid. As Allen observes, international aid workers “*establish spaces in which the horrors they sometimes witness can be observed from a distance or even—sometimes—not be seen at all*”, living in compounds in which a “*strange semblance of life at home is replicated*” (Allen, 2015: 96). These spaces, like the rules and norms established by humanitarians to institutionalise their engagement, set ‘necessary limits’ to altruism, helping aid workers navigate the tensions between empathy and self-preservation (ibid). Yet there are obvious dangers: Allen and others have described how in northern Uganda, in the 1990s and 2000s, aid agencies were drawn into the Ugandan government’s anti-insurgency strategy, involving mass forced displacement of millions of people into internally displaced persons (IDP) camps with appalling conditions (Allen, 2015; Branch, 2008). International aid workers, living in compounds in the town of Gulu and visiting the camps only for short periods during the day, limited their exposure to the poor conditions and significant dangers experienced by those living in the camps. This was “*a situation in which humanitarians working in their bubbles and meaning well allowed terrible things to occur*” (Allen, 2015: 114). Returning some years later, Allen found little knowledge of these events amongst international aid workers, who were mostly young, enthusiastic and newly arrived; thus, he writes, “*as elsewhere, the lived memories of international humanitarians operating in northern Uganda are short, and institutionalized amnesia prevails*” (ibid: 116).

This resonates with a wider body of work on trends towards securitisation, bunkerisation and enclosure in humanitarian aid work (Duffield, 2010, 2012; Weigand & Andersson, 2019). It was in South Sudan that Duffield and colleagues first examined processes of ‘bunkerisation’, observing how, even in the relative calm that followed the 2005 peace agreement, there was a “*widespread withdrawal and encampment of donors, UN agencies and the larger international NGOs into... fortified aid compounds*” (Duffield, 2010: 455; see also Collinson & Duffield, 2013; Felix da Costa, 2012). This led Duffield (2010) to describe an ‘archipelago’ of international spaces across South Sudan, concentrated around urban centres and airstrips, highly connected between themselves but separated from the world outside them. Dynamics of ‘bunkerisation’ have subsequently been explored in other contexts, including Mali (Andersson, 2016), Afghanistan (Andersson & Weigand, 2015; Weigand & Andersson, 2019) and Haiti (Lemay-Hébert, 2018).

In sum, while it was perhaps once true to argue, as Stirrat did in 2008, that we knew very little about aid workers themselves – their “*hopes and dreams and their own visions of what they are doing*” (Stirrat, 2008: 407) – as well as how they live, work and socialise, the same can hardly be said today, with a significant body of research now examining the lives and life-worlds of

humanitarian and development professionals. Studies have examined aid workers' personal and professional lives and life histories, including their trajectories into and through the aid industry (Eyben, 2012; Heathershaw, 2016; Roth, 2015b), their subjectivities and self-identifications (Heathershaw, 2016; Nowicka & Kaweh, 2009), and how they grapple with the moral dilemmas and contradictions they encounter (Fechter, 2016; Roth, 2015b), including tensions between altruism, selfishness and professionalism, and their discomfort with expatriate lifestyles (de Jong, 2011; Fechter, 2012a). Studies have also examined international aid workers' mobility, their experiences of living abroad, and their 'ambivalent' (Cook, 2012), 'elite' (Goetze & de Guevara, 2014) or 'parochial' (Rajak & Stirrat, 2011) cosmopolitanism, including their tendency to socialise amongst themselves, living in relatively closed, isolated social worlds (ibid; Eyben, 2011; Harper, 2011; Nowicka & Kaweh, 2009; Smirl, 2015). Detailed ethnographic research has contributed to a richer understanding of aid workers' material, spatial and social practices, which – as several authors have clearly shown – can have tangible, far-reaching effects on the design, implementation and outcomes of aid (Smirl, 2015; Allen, 2015; Marriage, 2004).

1.4.4. Beyond 'Aidland' and 'Peaceland': on 'local labour' in the humanitarian industry

Until recently, the burgeoning body of literature on life in 'Aidland' has predominantly focused on international aid workers: typically "*hyper-mobile expatriates occupying coordination and managerial positions*" (Pascucci, 2019: 744; see also Fradejas-García & Mülli, 2019; Harrison, 2013; James, 2020; Norman, 2023; Peters, 2020; Sundberg, 2020, for a similar critique). In doing so, it has perpetuated "*a view of everyday life in humanitarian spaces as marked by hyper-mobility, securitized living and defensive architectures, 'scattered' and unstable – yet somehow glamorous and privileged – personal lives*" (Pascucci, 2019: 746). The picture that emerges is of a globally connected class of international aid workers, living and working in 'spaces of aid' that are closely connected to one another, but separated from their immediate surroundings, physically, socially and spatially. Yet, as is well-acknowledged, the vast majority of professional aid workers are not 'hyper-mobile expatriates' living and working in 'bubbles' or 'bunkers', but rather the locally hired staff of international organisations, or the employees of subcontracted domestic NGOs. One oft-cited statistic suggests national aid workers account for upwards of 90% of staff 'in the field' (Egeland et al., 2011; Stoddard, 2020). Estimates of the numbers of people working in aid are complicated, for many reasons, but evidence suggests that the aid workforce is growing: in 2020, for example, there were an estimated 630,000 humanitarian staff working in crisis-affected countries, a number that has more than doubled since 2010, linked to growing funding, rising needs, and the increased number of countries with a coordinated international humanitarian response (Obrecht

and Swithern, 2022). In 2020, around 93% of these aid workers were nationals of the countries they were working in. The majority worked for international NGOs, followed by the Red Cross/Red Crescent, UN agencies, and local/national NGOs, with the latter accounting for around a sixth of humanitarian staff, or 101,000 people, by these estimates (Obrecht & Swithern, 2022).

Another compelling reason to focus on the working lives and conditions of 'local' aid workers is that, in many places of humanitarian operation, the aid industry is a major employer. Since the end of the Cold War, the humanitarian industry has undergone a vast expansion in 'challenging political environments', including terms of geographical reach, funding, the number of agencies involved and the complexity of operations and responsibilities (Duffield, 2012). The presence of these aid agencies has far-reaching social, political and economic effects. Büscher and Vlassenroot, for example, explore how the arrival on a 'massive scale' of international aid agencies and UN peacekeepers in Goma during successive humanitarian crises led to the transformation of urban space, to the 'dollarization' of the economy, to a boom in real estate and to the creation of a new, hypercompetitive labour market, creating new tensions and conflicts and primarily benefiting an already-powerful local elite (Büscher & Vlassenroot, 2010).

Despite this, as Omidian and Panter-Brick argue, until recently we have known far more about the stories of expatriate aid workers than about the circumstances of 'local' aid workers, or the risks and dilemmas that they face (Omidian & Panter-Brick, 2015). Relatively few studies have looked at the 'local labour' on which the aid industry relies, or at 'who' local aid workers are socially (Pascucci, 2019). While some recent studies have contributed to filling this gap, they have largely focused on the experiences of national staff members directly employed by international organisations (c.f. Ong & Combinido, 2018; Peters, 2016; Sundberg, 2020; Ward, 2021), or on very different contexts, as in the case of Yarrow's ethnography of Ghanaian NGO workers and activists and their interpretations of development (Yarrow, 2008, 2011), or Décobert's study of a local NGO working in the Thai-Burma borderlands (Décobert, 2016). Sundberg (2019, 2020), for example, focuses on national desk officers in international donor agencies in Tanzania; Ong and Combinido (2018) on Filipino staff of international aid agencies engaged in digital humanitarian projects following Typhoon Haiyan and Pascucci (2019) on locally recruited aid workers in Jordan and Lebanon.

The studies that do exist point to the complexity of delineating who constitutes a ‘local’ or ‘national’ aid worker, and to the importance of looking beyond the national/international or local/expatriate binaries (James, 2022; Peters, 2016). These binaries profoundly structure experiences of work in the humanitarian industry, engendering deep inequalities in relation to salaries, benefits, mobility, influence over projects and programmes, opportunities for advancement and exposure to risk (Fassin, 2007; Pascucci, 2019; Peters, 2016; Redfield, 2012). At the same time, they conceal heterogeneous, complex social identities and experiences (James, 2022; Martin de Almagro, 2018; Peters, 2016),⁸ and are cross-cut by inequalities along the lines of race, gender and class (Benton, 2016; Read, 2018; Roth, 2015b). Peters, for example, shows how Angolan development workers in an international organisation strategically concealed aspects of their identity, life experience, skills and family circumstances in order to conform to expectations of them as ‘local’ staff; this ‘practicing local’ enabled access to employment, but limited opportunities for progression (Peters, 2016). Martin de Almagro points to the ways in which elements of sameness and difference are strategically performed and produced by members of Congolese and international peacebuilding organisations in the DRC, for different audiences and in different spaces, to meet particular goals (Martin de Almagro, 2018). James (2022), meanwhile, examines how Congolese humanitarians working for international NGOs in eastern DRC engaged in ‘shapeshifting’: playing different roles for different audiences, performing different forms of ‘localness’ and distance, and drawing on different elements of their identities and personal histories. This enabled them to negotiate access with different political authorities and armed groups, representing part of the relational labour of locally hired humanitarians on which international aid agencies rely, but which often remains hidden (James, 2022). Yet, they also faced risks, having to balance pressures from armed and political actors and conflicting demands from personal networks and employers, which, at times, became impossible to manage (ibid). Local staff of international organisations, as James describes elsewhere, thus find themselves both *at risk*, and *a risk* (James, 2020). Their personal histories and networks in the regions where they work are a crucial resource for their employers, but their social and political embeddedness also means they are perceived by their foreign colleagues as a risk to the organisation’s performance of neutrality and impartiality, limiting possibilities for promotion, while their embeddedness places them at greater risk of exposure to external pressures and violence.

⁸ See also Mac Ginty, 2015; Paffenholz, 2015 and Roepstorff, 2020, amongst others, on the ‘local’ as a fraught, overloaded category.

Several studies point to the particular challenges and pressures facing those working in their own countries and communities, and to the heightened risks to which they are exposed (Omidian & Panter-Brick, 2015; Wagner, 2015; Santschi et al., 2018; James, 2020). Omidian and Panter-Brick, for example, explore the narratives of local humanitarian workers in the Afghan-Pakistan border areas, who face extreme risks through their involvement with humanitarian organisations; many experienced their work as not only dangerous but also frustrating and distressing, with the risks and stresses of their jobs leading to a range of physical and psychological ailments. They persevere because of a sense of moral calling, religious duty or social obligation to one's community or country, as well as a lack of other options for employment (Omidian & Panter-Brick, 2015). It is well-known, more broadly, that local and national staff are disproportionately affected by attacks on aid workers, not just because they constitute the largest percentage of the aid workforce, but also because they are relied upon to deliver in the most violent contexts, reflecting wider dynamics of risk transfer to local actors (Obrecht & Swithern, 2022; Stoddard, 2020). Meanwhile a growing body of psychological research on aid worker mental health has pointed to the importance of understanding, not just direct exposure to violence, but also the role of burnout, including exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and lack of accomplishment (Putman et al., 2009), and the wider organisational environment, including levels of stress and overwork, unfair work practices, inequalities between international and national staff, reliable salaries and support structures and length of contract, all of which can have significant consequences for mental health and wellbeing (Ager et al., 2012; Carr et al., 2010; Jachens, 2019; Young & Pakenham, 2021). One recent survey found that national aid workers reported significantly higher wellbeing and lower emotional exhaustion than international aid workers, perhaps due to the latter having less local support around them, but that short-term workers had significantly lower well-being than those on longer-term contracts (Young & Pakenham, 2021); a reminder, again, of the need for nuanced analyses that look beyond local/international binaries.

Recent studies have also pointed to the often-unacknowledged affective and relational labour undertaken by locally contracted aid workers (Carruth, 2015; James, 2022; Pascucci, 2019; Sundberg, 2019). Carruth, for example, shows how Somali nurses running a mobile medical team for UNICEF in the Somali Region of Ethiopia were able to work across clan lines, forging new relations of trust and care (Carruth, 2015). They gained respect and esteem from local populations, not just through the provision of high-quality healthcare, but also through their time and relational labour, their recognition of customary caregiving practices and local determinations of need, and their strategic efforts to forge "*familiar, kinship-based, and uniquely*

Somali relations of care” (ibid: 59-60). Sundberg examines the relational labour of local desk officers employed by foreign donors in Tanzania. Staying in roles far longer than posted staff from donor countries, their knowledge and personal relationships, alongside their cultural and linguistic expertise, are crucial to the ability of donor organisations to build trusting relationships with local partners and with the Tanzanian government (Sundberg, 2020). At the same time, they enjoy less professional authority than their posted colleagues, and have inferior conditions of employment, including in relation to salaries, upward mobility, security clearance and job security (Sundberg, 2019, 2020). Elisa Pascucci, meanwhile, examines the forms of care and affective labour performed by locally contracted aid workers in Jordan and Lebanon. Like Sundberg, she shows how Jordanian and Lebanese staff are often recruited by international agencies because of their linguistic and cultural competence and ‘local knowledge’. They were often employed in frontline roles that were physically and emotionally demanding, requiring the (often unacknowledged) performance of immaterial labour. For example, they were perceived as mediators between local communities and international NGOs, which meant having to “*mediate and mitigate the messiness and unpredictability of aid work... through their bodies and presence*” (Pascucci, 2019: 753).

Pascucci, importantly, draws our attention back to labour dynamics, and to aid work as a form of work.⁹ She argues that the local-international divide leads to differential precarities for ‘local’ aid workers, and proposes the precarity of labour as a lens through which to analyse spatial hierarchies in the aid industry, defining precarity as a “*socially and politically distributed condition associated with material and affective labour performed in conditions of (relative) uncertainty and sub-alternity*” (Pascucci, 2019: 744). Precarity is manifested not only in the performance of care and affective labour, in ways that expand “*far beyond the boundaries of working life*” (Pascucci, 2019: 747), but also in short-term contracts and prevailing uncertainty, and long periods of unemployment and underemployment. Rao (2017) also examines the uncertainty associated with short-term contract work, this time in the context of early-career contract workers in the UN in Geneva. Her interviewees accepted very short-term contracts, varying in length from a few weeks to a year, and sought to demonstrate flexibility to their employers, including remaining unemployed between contracts, and moving long distances on the promise of a job. They did so in the hope of securing longer-term UN positions, work perceived to be meaningful and prestigious. Yet, there were significant implications for their personal lives, including relationships with friends,

⁹ This resonates with the work of Anne-Meike Fechter, discussed above, but whereas Fechter focuses on international aid workers, Pascucci engages specifically with locally recruited staff.

family and partners, and most struggled with the uncertainty and inability to plan, engendering significant anxiety (Rao, 2017). A similar picture emerges from Mülli's ethnographic study of the work, life-worlds and life stories of early-career professionals in the UN in Geneva and Vienna, whose situation she describes as 'privileged precarity'. They accept insecure conditions in the hope of gaining cultural and social capital and long-term work in the UN, demonstrating *"readiness for self-exploitation for a 'good cause' in a prestigious international organization"* (Müllli, 2021: 295). Ong and Combinido, meanwhile, examine short-term contract-based humanitarian work in a very different context, considering how local technology and communications workers in the Philippines made use of the employment opportunities associated with the large influx of international aid agencies in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan. They were hired to test humanitarian innovations, such as feedback mechanisms and hazard mapping platforms. This work created opportunities for personal and professional mobility. At the same time, the authors argue, local tech workers were 'doubly marginalised', both as 'local' workers and as providers of short-term digital labour considered peripheral to traditional aid programmes. They developed subjectivities as both 'second class citizens' in the aid industry and as *"entrepreneurial survivors" coping with disaster in (self-)exploitative work"* (Ong & Combinido, 2018: 87).

Each of these studies resonates with Silke Roth's assertion that aidwork epitomises the nature of work in contemporary neoliberal societies, including in terms of the demands it places on workers, the requirement to demonstrate mobility and flexibility, and in the insecure, short-term and projectized nature of employment (Roth, 2015b). Aidwork, she writes,

presents an excellent case to unravel the contradictory relationship between self-realization, burnout and personal growth that characterizes work in contemporary neoliberal societies... Aidwork can be a reaction to working conditions in neoliberal societies and at the same time epitomizes the search for meaning, short-term project-based work and a lack of work-life balance (Roth, 2015b: 59-60).¹⁰

Silke Roth's book has been an important source of inspiration for this thesis. Roth's interlocutors are diverse, and she carefully considers how, at every stage, experiences of aid work are shaped by inequalities related to gender, race, nationality and class, and how this both reflects and reproduces global hierarchies (Roth, 2015b). Nonetheless, her interlocutors from both the Global North and South are all, she notes, from '(upper)-middle-class backgrounds', and appear,

¹⁰ I would also note, here, Kathleen Millar's point (following Arendt), that the distinction between 'work' and 'life' is an analytical construct, since *"life itself"* is labour (Arendt, 1958: 87, cited in Millar, 2014: 48); not least in the work of care for family.

typically, to be people for whom aid work is presented as distinct from ‘normal work’ or ‘normal life’. She writes, for example, that Aidland “*seems to attract individuals who do not feel challenged in their ‘normal’ work lives and therefore leave their previous careers behind*” (ibid: 60). Like the interlocutors in Rao and Mülli’s studies, aid work appears in Roth’s work as a precarious career path on which people embark through a search for meaning, personal growth and professional fulfilment. The implication, often, is that these are individuals who have foregone other, perhaps more stable, better paying career options. Aidwork, Roth suggests, can be a privilege of those with other sources of income to fall back on, and/or a sacrifice for those who choose short-term, low-paid jobs in their effort to work for the ‘public good’ (Roth, 2015b: 63). Aidwork can thus be considered, she suggests, as a form of ‘edge work’ and voluntary risk taking, including the acceptance of physical risk and precarious careers by those seeking more challenging and meaningful work (Roth, 2015a). The situation is very different for locally hired aid workers in places like South Sudan, where jobs with NGOs and international organisations are the primary source of salaried employment in a context of profound economic insecurity, and in which salaries are shared amongst extended networks of kin. I draw on and seek to complement Roth’s work with a study of a different segment of the aid workforce.

The thesis seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on the lives, life-worlds and life histories of aid workers, including recent work seeking to destabilise the stereotype of the aid worker as a ‘hyper-mobile expatriate’, and to centre the experiences and perspectives of those working in their own countries and communities, who represent the vast majority of aid workers worldwide. It builds on insights from this literature, including the ways in which the local/international binary conceals heterogeneous social identities while (re)producing significant inequalities; the challenges and risks that facing those who do not operate in a ‘bubble’, but rather are intimately socially and politically embedded in the places where they work; and the prevalence of short-term, project-based work. However, much of this recent work has focused on the experiences of the locally contracted staff of international agencies (c.f. Ong & Combinido, 2018; Pascucci, 2019; Sundberg, 2020). This thesis, instead, focuses on the aspirations, experiences and career histories of individuals running or working for subcontracted domestic NGOs, who represent an increasingly integral part of the workforce of the international humanitarian industry, but who have been largely overlooked in this literature.¹¹ The rhythms, requirements, processes and practices of the international aid industry intimately

¹¹ In this sense it is more akin to the work of authors Décobert (2016) and Yarrow (2011) on domestic NGOs working in aid and development in Myanmar and Ghana respectively, but focuses on a very different context.

shape their working lives, the ways in which these organisations are run and the experiences of working for them, even if their staff are not the direct employees of international organisations. In other words, through the subcontracting of NGOs into the aid architecture, including the terms of contracts and conditions of funding, international organisations play a significant role in shaping a labour industry far beyond their own immediate employees.

1.4.5. On precarity, privilege and ‘doing being middle class’

Finally, the thesis seeks to situate discussions about the life histories and life-worlds of South Sudanese aid workers in the context of debates around growing inequality in South Sudan, including processes of class stratification in the context of a monetising and marketising economy.¹² This focus on class emerged over the course of conducting and analysing the research, as it became clear that a study of the experiences and perspectives of South Sudanese NGO workers would be unsatisfactory if it failed to take into account their fraught, ambivalent position within South Sudan’s complex, shifting class structures, during a period of significant social and economic change. In the thesis, I explore how NGO employment is intimately bound up with aspirations for and experiences of ‘middle-classness’ (Mercer & Lemanski, 2020) in South Sudan, and argue that this is characterised by a particular interplay of precarity and privilege. At the same time, I am cautious of characterising those working for or running NGOs as a singular ‘middle class’ or ‘NGO class’ (c.f. Schuller, 2009), because of the significant inequalities and heterogeneity of experiences *within* this group.

The idea that NGO employment is bound up with class stratification is not new. In the 1990s and 2000s, a growing body of increasingly critical literature on NGOs examined how foreign-funded NGOs and influxes of aid dollars influenced class dynamics. Hearn (2007) and Petras (1999), for example, drawing on Marxist theories, depicted NGOs as the ‘new compradors’: an intermediary class dependent on the international bourgeoisie, and acting in the interests of international capitalism over the interests of the popular classes. Schuller, somewhat similarly, characterises NGOs and NGO employees as ‘semi-elites’: “*an ideologically dependent transnational middle class that identifies with foreigners and the transnational capitalist class*” (Schuller, 2009: 97) and that enables the rule of capitalist elites in a neoliberal world system. In some ways, the notion of an

¹² In this thesis, ‘monetisation’ refers to the shift towards a money economy, a fraught, contested process involving the “*commodification... of productive and reproductive resources, including human life itself, that have formed the basis of wealth and value across Southern Sudan*” (Leonardi, 2011: 216), and the growing dependence of people across South Sudan on money and markets to meet their basic needs (see, especially, Thomas, 2019), including to purchase food from markets (ibid) and to pay school fees (Aquila, 2021). These trends include the commodification of land, cattle, labour and education (see Aquila, 2021; Thomas, 2019; Leonardi, 2011; Diing et al., 2021).

‘NGO class’ resonates with South Sudanese context, where ‘doing being middle-class’ (Lentz, 2020) is often bound up with NGO employment. At the same time, there is a risk in these analyses of presenting a relatively singular, clear-cut view of class, in a way that fails to capture the complexity and heterogeneity of experiences, perspectives and positionalities of South Sudanese NGO workers, including the significant inequalities *within* the NGO sector, and the complex interplay of precarity and privilege that this work entails.

To engage with this, I draw on recent work centred around the lived experiences of the African middle classes (Khunou, 2015; Mercer & Lemanski, 2020). Such work has sought to move beyond the efforts of development policymakers and consultancy firms to measure, quantify, define and delineate the African middle classes (Mercer & Lemanski, 2020; Spronk, 2020), and beyond discourses of a singular, rising, African ‘middle class’ (Scharrer et al., 2018). Instead, it calls for greater attention to the “*unstable, tenuous and context-specific nature of middle-class prosperity in contemporary Africa*” (Mercer & Lemanski, 2020: 429), and to “*the everyday realities, subjective experiences and ‘insider views’ of its members as they perform their middle-classness*” (Ndlovu, 2020: 582).

This body of ethnographic, anthropological and geographic work has usefully sought to highlight the complexity and multiplicity of the ‘African middle classes’, not as a fixed, unitary category but rather as a heterogeneous and shifting ‘classification-in-the-making’ (c.f. Mercer & Lemanski, 2020; Spronk, 2018). Grace Khunou, for example, drawing on life histories with two Black middle-class women in South Africa, argues that their experiences during apartheid were “*marred by constant shifts and everyday negotiations. These complexities were a result of the socio-economic and political impermanence of their middle-class position, competing social inclusion needs and also the constantly shifting membership to this class*” (Khunou, 2015:91). For these two women, Khunou argues, middle-classness was shaped by apartheid racial politics, and was not experienced homogeneously throughout their lives, nor in the same way in different spaces. Rather, she argues, “*being middle class and black is heterogeneously experienced and thus should be understood as such*” (ibid: 101). Hull (2020: 562), meanwhile, drawing on ethnographic work with nurses in South Africa, argues that “*narratives that emphasize the rise of the middle classes risk overlooking the growing precarity faced by their members and the feelings of ambivalence that pervade many aspects of life, from professional commitments to political allegiance*”, particularly in the context of austerity and casualisation.

Mercer and Lemanski (2020), summarising research in Angola, Botswana, Ghana, South Africa and Zimbabwe, highlight the *precarity of prosperity* as central to the lived experiences of ‘middle-

classiness' in Africa, with shared experiences across several ethnographic accounts including *"the joys and strains of social obligation, the fear of being found out, the permanence of precarity and the changing role of the state in providing the 'conditions of possibility' for middle-class lives"* (ibid: 436). The precarity of prosperity refers here to the uncertainty and instability that can accompany the relative acquisition of wealth and middle-class status (ibid).

The notion of the 'precarity of prosperity' resonates with the position of NGO employees in South Sudan. This work is characterised by a particular interplay of precarity and privilege. In a context of hyperinflation and widespread unemployment, NGO jobs, particularly when paid in dollars, are amongst the most coveted in the country. These jobs are highly sought after, with salaries often supporting extended networks of people. Yet these roles are also uncertain, intermittent and precarious. Staff at all levels of organisations may work without pay for weeks or months at a time to sustain activities and organisations, or in the hope of future salaried employment. The unpaid labour of South Sudanese NGO staff often smooths out the gaps between short-term, internationally funded projects, with staff continuing to work without pay while waiting for funds to arrive, or to be renewed.

Precarity is a complex and fraught concept, and I use it cautiously. The concept gained significant traction in the social sciences in the latter part of the twentieth century, including in geography (Coe, 2013; Strauss, 2018; Waite, 2009) and anthropology (Han, 2018; Muehlebach, 2013). Anthropological interpretations range from precarity as a specific and bounded historical condition, linked to the decline of the welfare state and to the transformation of labour in the context of globalisation and neoliberalism; to precarity as an ontological condition that is *"common to all beings, by virtue of an embodied existence"* (Han, 2018: 332). It has a distinct history not just as an academic concept but also as a central motif and rallying point for resistance amongst activists and social justice movements (Waite, 2009), emerging into widespread usage in Europe in the 1980s in response to labour reforms, including casualisation, the decline of the 'Fordist assembly line' and assaults on the welfare state (Han, 2018).

As the popularity of precarity as an academic concept has expanded, it has been criticised for centring and extrapolating from the experiences of workers in Western Europe and North America, and obscuring diverse experiences and histories of waged employment in different parts of the world (Monteith et al., 2021; see also Millar, 2017). An example of this can be seen in Standing's much-cited concept of the 'precariat' as a mass social 'class-in-the-making'

(Standing, 2011), and as a ‘dangerous’ class characterised by anxiety and anger (ibid), which has been criticised for making simplistic assumptions and homogenising varied historical experiences (Millar, 2017; Monteith et al., 2021; Munck, 2013). Munck, for example, suggests that the concept of the ‘precariat’ *“perhaps captures some of the feelings among Northern academics, themselves subject to casualisation and the end of job security”*, but questions the relevance of the concept *“for the millions of workers and urban poor in the global South for whom precariousness has always been a seemingly natural condition”* (Munck, 2013: 747), as well as for many excluded populations in the so-called global north (Baker, 2014; Millar, 2017).

The concept of precarity also carries with it a risk of reifying a vision of regular waged labour as an ‘ideal’ type against which ‘precarious’, ‘informal’ or ‘non-standard’ employment is measured (Monteith et al., 2021), even though the former is a *“historical and geographical exception”* (ibid: 1; see also Neilson and Rossiter, 2008; Millar, 2014, 2017; Munck, 2013). Ferguson and Li (2018) point to the risk of reinforcing teleological narratives in which salaried employment is viewed as the *“culmination of the “development” process”*. They call for an ‘analytical decentering’ of waged employment as a presumed norm, pointing out that *“discussions of so-called “precarity” often rely on residual categories of analysis... that render everything outside the world of “jobs” a kind of negative space, defined by that which it is not”* (ibid: 1). Yet, it is waged employment that is a relatively recent invention, that has been *“subsequently elevated above all other forms of work”* and exported around the world through European colonialism, relegating other forms of ‘value-generating activities’ to the *“status of the ‘domestic’, the ‘informal’ and/or the ‘subsistent’”* (Monteith et al., 2021: 3; see also Barchiesi, 2012, on waged labour as a mode of governmentality). As Millar (2017: 7) summarises, the discourse and concept of precarity can,

produce unintended political effects—at times obscuring racial, class, and gender inequalities; emphasizing narratives of loss that fail to resonate with workers outside the global North; or upholding normative ideals of “decent” work and “the good life” that have long justified forms of discipline, exclusion, and exploitation.

At the same time, as Muchlebach (2013) points out in a review article, anthropologists have documented lived experiences of precarity in specific situations around the world without suggesting that these appear or are apprehended in the same way everywhere. Ferguson and Li (2018: 2) suggest that what is significant about precarity is that it surfaces issues beyond the economic: *“the anxiety we are identifying here is not just about the loss of income... but also about the wider*

implications of increasing casualization, subcontracting, freelancing, improvising". They suggest that instead of *"trad[ing] a grand progress story for an equally grand narrative of dystopian failure"* (Ferguson and Li, 2018: 3), researchers should ask what is and is not changing about work, including the types, patterns and meanings of work, in specific empirical contexts. Millar, somewhat similarly, suggests a useful approach to precarity is one that is grounded in analysis of specific labour regimes and political-economic structures, and that considers how material conditions shape affect, subjectivity and lived experience, or, in other words, one that seeks to *"capture the relationship between precarious labour and precarious life"* (Millar, 2017: 5); and that approaches precarity not as a fixed empirical object but rather *"as a method of inquiry that asks how unstable work relates to fragile conditions of life in particular times and places"* (Millar, 2017: 6). Precarity, she suggests in an earlier article, is a *"useful analytic for conceptualizing the labor condition as inseparable from issues of subjectivity, affect, sociality, and desire"* (Millar, 2014: 35).

I explore precarity here primarily as a labour condition, rather than as an ontological condition or class category (Millar, 2017). I draw particularly on the approach set out by Pascucci, who proposes the precarity of labour, in relation to the study of humanitarianism, as *"an analytical tool for moving beyond disembodied narratives of transnational liminality and exceptionality, tracing the spatialities of international humanitarianism as a localized, material-economic and embodied actor in postcolonial societies"* (Pascucci, 2019: 746). I follow Pascucci in understanding precarity as *"resulting from experiences of work marked by uncertainty, insecure and diminishing material conditions, and (partially) unacknowledged performances of care and affective labour"* (ibid: 746), and as a specific, socially and politically produced and unevenly distributed condition. In addition, following Kindersley and Majok (2022: 4), I distinguish between *"always-precarious family farming and pastoralist livelihoods, and developing forms of individualised cash labour and land rental"*, recognising that 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"*. This reflects Millar's point, of the need to recognise that precarity is *"originary to capitalism"*, in that *"very condition of having to depend on a wage to sustain one's life is what makes a worker precarious—not just the specific structures of this or that job"* (ibid: 6). This observation is highly pertinent to South Sudan, which has seen, over the last 50 years, a transition from relatively self-sufficient, dynamic and varied subsistence systems organised around kinship and social networks to a deeply unequal market economy, in which people increasingly need money to survive, including to purchase food from markets (Thomas, 2019). The expansion of the aid industry, and the desirability of NGO employment, is inextricably connected to processes of monetisation and marketisation that have led to a growing dependence on (intermittent and precarious) waged

labour, squeezing the space for other ways of life and engendering profound precarity (Diing et al., 2021; Kindersley & Majok, 2019, 2022).

1.5. Policy framings: the ‘localisation’ of humanitarian aid

Part of the context to, and relevance of, this thesis, is the recent focus on the ‘localisation’ of international humanitarian action, which has become a prominent discourse both in the international humanitarian industry and in South Sudan’s humanitarian arena. I provide here a brief introduction to the concept of ‘localisation’ and the localisation agenda.

The idea that international humanitarian action should build on ‘local capacities’ is not new. This principle is enshrined in the 1994 Red Cross/Red Crescent Code of Conduct (IFRC, 1994), the 2007 Principles of Partnership (GHP, 2007) and the various iterations of the Sphere Humanitarian Charter (e.g. Sphere Project, 2011), amongst other places. Evaluations and academic studies have long highlighted the tendency for international humanitarian interventions to sideline and undermine local capacities, as well as the consistent failure to translate commitments in this area into meaningful change (c.f. Cosgrave, 2007; Juma & Suhrke, 2002; Smillie, 2001). The ‘localisation agenda’ also echoes long-standing themes and debates in the development and peacebuilding fields. The ‘local turn’ in peacebuilding, for example, followed a loss of confidence in international peacebuilding and liberal peace interventions, and saw peace workers and researchers calling for more active involvement of local groups (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Paffenholz, 2015; Roelofs, 2020).

Nonetheless, the run-up to the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) saw a marked change in the tenor and volume of the debate around localisation in international humanitarian action, leading to a series of high-profile commitments. The WHS was a vast event, bringing together some 9,000 people from 180 countries (United Nations General Assembly, 2016a). It was convened by then-UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, who described the Summit as coming at a time of “*skyrocketing humanitarian needs alongside a historic shortfall in the funding required to meet them*” (ibid.: 2). Ahead of the Summit, consultations were held over three years with 23,000 people in 153 countries (ibid.). These consultations painted a picture of deep dissatisfaction and frustration with the international humanitarian system, including its continued failure to listen and be accountable to people affected by crises, and its tendency to sideline rather than support the efforts of local and national organisations, governments and first responders (WHS Secretariat, 2015). The consultations pointed to the need for radical change in the humanitarian architecture,

which was seen by many, in the words of the Secretary General, as “*outdated and resistant to change, fragmented and uncommitted to working collaboratively, and too dominated by the interests and funding of a few countries*” (United Nations General Assembly, 2016b: 4).

Also significant in garnering support for ‘localisation’ was the idea that the humanitarian system was increasingly financially overstretched, with the gap between humanitarian needs and available funding growing year-on-year. Ahead of the Summit, the Secretary General convened a High-Level Panel (HLP) on Humanitarian Financing, with members who largely came from outside the humanitarian sector, with the aim of finding solutions to the growing ‘funding gap’. The panel concluded, amongst other things, that “*partnering with national NGOs and civil society organisations is essential to promoting cost-effectiveness changes throughout the humanitarian aid ecosystem*” (HLP, 2016: 19), and called for donors and international organisations to take concrete steps to promote localisation (ibid). It was this panel that initially called for a ‘Grand Bargain’ to improve the efficiency of humanitarian aid delivery (ibid). This cost-efficiency framing played a central role in getting ‘localisation’ onto the agenda. In addition, political will around some of the thornier subjects up for discussion at the Summit – including refugee sharing or UN reform – was lacking (see Aly, 2016). Localisation, however, was a sufficiently broad, relatively uncontroversial concept that variously positioned actors could get behind (Robinson, 2018).

At the Summit itself, momentum for change crystallised into commitments and agreements. Participants made some 3,500 individual and collective commitments, and launched a plethora of initiatives on wide-ranging issues,¹³ including many which related explicitly or implicitly to ‘localisation’. Most prominent amongst these was the Grand Bargain, an agreement between many of the world’s largest humanitarian donors and aid agencies, which now has 65 signatories, including 25 member states and 12 UN agencies (IASC, n.d.). Comprised of 51 commitments across ten workstreams, the Grand Bargain was designed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action (The Grand Bargain, 2016). It committed signatories to channel 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders ‘as directly as possible’ by 2020, and to increase multi-year investment in their institutional capacities (The Grand Bargain, 2016).¹⁴ The Charter for Change (C4C) committed international NGOs to change their own ways of working, including to pass 25% of funding to national NGOs and to improve

¹³ See, e.g., <https://agendaforhumanity.org/>

¹⁴ In 2021, the Grand Bargain 2.0 was agreed, narrowing ten workstreams down to a focus on two ‘enabling priorities’ – localisation and quality financing (IASC, 2021).

transparency and partnership practices (Charter for Change, n.d.).¹⁵ Localisation was branded a ‘winner’ of the Summit by commentators (Aly, 2016), and the Secretary General, summarising the outcomes of the Summit, wrote that it marked a ‘turning point’ in how national and local actors should be engaged and funded (United Nations General Assembly, 2016b).

The Grand Bargain, and the WHS more broadly, catalysed a flurry of activity around localisation, including an abundance of projects, initiatives, research papers and opinion pieces. Localisation became ubiquitous in discussions about humanitarian reform and the future of the aid sector. A 2021 article described localisation as now being “*hard-wired into the humanitarian discourse*” (Alexander, 2021), while the introduction to a recent edition of Humanitarian Exchange describes localisation as having gone from being a “*fringe conversation... to a global priority*” (Humanitarian Practice Network, 2021: 4). Changes in practice, however, have been very limited. Overall, analyses broadly conclude that structural and systemic changes have not taken place, and that the ambitions and aspirations around ‘localisation’ emerging from the WHS, including commitments within the Grand Bargain, have not been realised (Barbelet et al., 2021; Roepstorff, 2022). Direct funding to local and national actors, including governments, has remained very low, falling from 2.8% of total public donor humanitarian funding in 2017 to 1.2% in 2022 (Development Initiatives, 2023). Most funding for local and national NGOs is channelled indirectly, through one or more intermediaries, but this is very hard to track. Development Initiatives’ report suggested that an additional 0.9% of humanitarian assistance went *indirectly* to local and national actors in 2023, but note that lack of improvement in the reporting of funds means that tracking progress towards the 25% commitment “*remains impossible*” (ibid: 69).

There is now a significant body of research analysing progress towards ‘localisation’, or lack thereof, as well as the various barriers and challenges (for a review, see Barbelet et al., 2021). Analyses point to the breadth and ambiguity of localisation, which is defined and interpreted in many different ways (Wall & Hedlund, 2016), resulting in persistent confusion (Van Brabant & Patel, 2018), and enabling a focus on piecemeal change over radical reform (Saferworld, 2020). Some point out that the localisation discourse has been driven by and continues to centre international actors and, as such, is “*perceived as counterproductive to meaningful change*” (Barbelet et al., 2021: 9). Boateng highlights the “*coloniality of foreign-led localization*” (Boateng, 2021: 10), and

¹⁵ The C4C has now been signed by 39 international NGOs and endorsed by 510 local and national NGOs from 57 countries (ibid). In 2020, the C4C was extended for another five years, with a greater focus on strengthening country-level platforms for change (Charter for Change, 2020).

cautions against a ‘localisation’ that does “*little more than giving a local face to international logics*” (ibid: 10). Others contend that localisation has become “*little more than a technocratic exercise*”, failing to address issues of racism, discrimination, and the aid sector’s colonial legacy, and argue against using the term (Peace Direct et al., 2021: 14).

The failure to make progress on ‘localisation’ reflects long-standing analyses of the barriers to change in the humanitarian system, with established institutional structures and organisational interests hard to overcome. Historically, efforts to reform the humanitarian system have been piecemeal and uneven, with deeper transformation limited by power dynamics, organisational culture, financing and incentive structures, including a preoccupation with growth, competition, market share and organisational survival (Bennett et al., 2016). ‘Localisation’ implies international agencies will let go of some of their own power and resources, a position at odds with incentives for institutional expansion (Barter & Sumlut, 2022). Meanwhile, vague and differing interpretations of key concepts can make it easier to reach political consensus on a reform, but also make it harder to implement, reflecting a form of ‘organised hypocrisy’ (Steets et al., 2016).¹⁶ On the part of donors, Goodwin and Ager’s detailed review of the UK Government’s mixed progress on localisation highlights practical and political constraints, with logistical concerns, conceptual ambiguity and domestic political pressures all limiting space for more radical interpretations of localisation (Goodwin & Ager, 2021).

Localisation, of course, is not one coherent, homogeneous policy, but rather a bundle of interconnected ideas, discourses, commitments and debates. Definitions of ‘localisation’, and the ‘local’ within it, have been the subject of considerable debate, and remain unsettled (Barbelet et al., 2021; Wall & Hedlund, 2016). Motivations for supporting localisation range from improving efficiency to subverting the aid sector’s deeply entrenched inequalities (Patel & Van Brabant, 2017). Indeed, the ambiguity of ‘localisation’, and its ability to subsume an array of differing interests and interpretations, may well have been key to its success. As Mosse writes, the ideas that gain currency tend to be the ones that can “*submerge ideological differences, allowing compromise, room for manoeuvre or multiple criteria of success*” (Mosse, 2011: 11). Such policies can mobilise support, in part, because they allow dialogue while preserving a degree of institutional power (ibid.).

¹⁶ Organised hypocrisy is an established phenomenon in world politics, used to describe “inconsistencies in organisations when they try to satisfy different values, interests and demands at the same time”, resulting in discrepancies between talk, decisions and action (Mörkenstam, 2019: 1722).

A growing body of academic research examines the trajectory of the localisation debate and its effects in different contexts. A central theme is the interpretation of the ‘local’ (c.f. Melis & Apthorpe, 2020; Roborh, 2021). Roepstorff (2020), for example, calls for a ‘critical localism’, drawing on the significant conceptual work already done by critical peacebuilding scholars (Mac Ginty, 2015; Paffenholz, 2015). Roepstorff argues that the ‘local’ in localisation is often constructed in binary opposition to the international, subsuming a diverse array of actors under one label and leading to blind spots in analysis (Roepstorff, 2020). With this comes a tendency to “*romanticise or vilify*” the local (ibid: 291). She suggests, instead, an understanding of the local not as a fixed spatial category, but as a contextual and relational concept that is always being constructed (ibid), drawing attention to how being ‘local’ is claimed and contested.

Studies also suggest that the discourse around ‘localisation’ has had distinctive effects in particular humanitarian arenas, even if not always the ones envisioned. For example, Roepstorff (2022) examines how, in the context of the Rohingya response in Bangladesh, being local became a ‘resource’ in the competition for funds, legitimacy and prestige. Distinctions were made between the ‘local’ and the ‘more local’, often based on size, and frustration was expressed about international NGOs working with the same few organisations, resulting in a particular concentration of power and resources. ‘Local’ NGOs viewed ‘national’ organisations as ‘not really local’, as they were bringing personnel from other parts of the country (ibid). Interviewees often brought up the Charter for Change and Grand Bargain, but there were highly divergent understandings of how localisation should be implemented and a “*major trust deficit*” between different stakeholders (ibid: 11). In research amongst Syrian medical-humanitarian organisations, Roborh similarly explores how the ‘local’ was politicised and instrumentalised in the competition for visibility, recognition and resources (Roborh, 2021).

The thesis responds, in part, to calls for greater critical reflection on and academic scrutiny of the ‘localisation’ agenda in humanitarian action, including grounded empirical studies of how localisation is interpreted, contested, and plays out in practice in specific contexts (c.f. Melis & Apthorpe, 2020; Pincock et al., 2021; Roepstorff, 2019). Connected to this is an attempt to ‘re-historicise’ humanitarian policy (Lewis, 2009): recognising that contemporary debates around ‘localisation’ echo many longer-standing ideas, initiatives and trends in the humanitarian and development fields, both in general and in South Sudan; and that – despite the relative youth of many South Sudanese NGOs – their founders and staff often have many years’ experience of

working in the humanitarian sector, and that the NGO landscape in South Sudan has been significantly shaped by many decades of international intervention.

1.6. The structure of the thesis

The structure of the thesis is as follows.

Following this introduction, the next chapter sets out the methodology that underpins the thesis.

Chapter three situates the thesis in a longer historical context. It discusses the fraught, predatory arrival of ‘government’ in southern Sudan and the violence of the colonial period, which set in motion patterns of spatial inequality within southern Sudan that remain relevant today. It traces the history of the ‘will to localise’ amongst external interveners in southern Sudan, beginning with the colonial and commercial incursions of the nineteenth century, as well as exploring how southern Sudanese individuals and communities have made claims upon, engaged with and adapted to external forces. It discusses the arrival of international NGOs and the beginning of large-scale relief operations in southern Sudan in the latter half of the twentieth century. It seeks to re-historicise (Lewis, 2009) ‘localisation’ in South Sudan, pointing in particular to the emphasis on ‘capacity building’ within the aid operations of the 1990s.

Chapter four turns to more recent history, tracing South Sudan’s NGO boom from the 1990s to the present day. It first highlights the breadth of South Sudanese associational life beyond NGOs. It then explores how the South Sudanese NGO landscape has been shaped by the long history of international humanitarian intervention in the region and an influx of foreign funding, by a changing political environment, and by histories of conflict and displacement. It points out that, while South Sudanese NGOs have been intimately shaped by trends towards professionalisation and managerialism, and incentivised in various ways to mimic international NGOs, they are also highly heterogeneous, and people have used the NGO form to pursue an array of goals.

Chapter five considers the shifting position of NGOs and NGO employment in the context of South Sudan’s changing political economy. It explores how the rapid monetisation and marketisation of South Sudanese society (Thomas, 2015, 2019), followed by economic collapse, substantially increased the competition for NGO employment. It also considers how NGOs relate to class stratification in South Sudan, and to growing inequality. It argues that NGO work

has become central to aspirations for ‘doing being middle class’ (Lentz, 2020) in South Sudan, with implications for professional aspirations and identities. At the same time, the sharing of salaries and the significant heterogeneity of incomes, experiences and positions amongst those employed by NGOs complicates ideas of a singular NGO class (Schuller, 2009) in this context. Finally, it considers who is able to access this employment, and how this has changed as NGO work has become more competitive. It also points to the pressure to continually secure new qualifications in the context of a precarious neoliberal labour market.

Chapter six examines how and why people come to found, lead and work for South Sudanese NGOs. It focuses particularly on the frequency of movement between international and South Sudanese NGOs, and explores how experiences of work within international organisations, including frustrations around being confined to the ‘implementariat’ (Peters, 2020) and a desire for greater professional authority, influenced decisions to found South Sudanese NGOs. It also points to narratives of (financial) sacrifice and struggle that were evident in the accounts of many South Sudanese NGO founders and directors, reflecting both the difficulty of establishing and sustaining an organisation in a context of economic crisis, and the constant struggle for organisational legitimacy in which NGO actors engage in a highly competitive NGO arena. It also highlights the common aspiration amongst NGO founders and directors to create employment, and to be a ‘job creator’ rather than a ‘job seeker’. Finally, it examines the significant economic, social and cultural capital required to establish and sustain an NGO.

Chapter seven examines the nature of work within South Sudanese NGOs, which is characterised by an interplay of precarity and privilege. First, it briefly revisits the ‘will to localise’ in contemporary South Sudan, pointing to the circularity of these discourses. It shows that, despite an upsurge in rhetoric around ‘localisation’ in South Sudan since 2016, direct funding to South Sudanese NGOs has changed very little. Instead, ‘localisation’ takes the form of increased subcontracting of South Sudanese NGOs, following a model similar to that described by Karim et al. (1996) and Bennett et al. (2010), discussed in chapters three and four respectively, albeit on a larger scale. It suggests that this represents a form of ‘subcontracted employment’ (Wills, 2009), in which those doing the frontline labour of aid are disconnected to an extent from their ‘real employers’. It also points to the prevalence of short-term, temporary employment contracts, reflecting wider trends towards flexibilisation and casualisation of labour in the aid industry (Hindman & Fechter, 2011; Roth, 2015b). Smoothing the gaps between short-term projects demands affective and relational labour (Pascucci, 2019; Peters, 2020) from the staff of South

Sudanese NGOs, including to manage expectations and maintain relationships. Finally, it examines one way in which South Sudanese NGO actors are navigating these pressures, through a turn to varied market-oriented income generation schemes.

Chapter eight concludes, and offers recommendations for policy and practice.

2. Methodology

“To listen to and tell a rush of stories is a method. And why not make the strong claim and call it a science, an addition to knowledge? Its research object is contaminated diversity; its unit of analysis is the indeterminate encounter. To learn anything we must revitalize arts of noticing and include ethnography and natural history. But we have a problem with scale. A rush of stories cannot be neatly summed up. Its scales do not nest neatly; they draw attention to interrupting geographies and tempos. These interruptions elicit more stories. This is the rush of stories’ power as a science.” (Tsing, 2015: 37, emphasis in original).

2.1. Chapter introduction

This thesis is based on eight months of in-depth, qualitative research in South Sudan. It draws on multiple data sources, including in-depth life-work history interviews, observations, unrecorded and informal conversations, and engagement with a wide range of grey and academic literature. My research has been shaped by scholarly concerns and ‘foreshadowed problems’, but also by real-world restrictions. These included the challenges and constraints of trying to conduct fieldwork safely, ethically and responsibly in a context affected by conflict, the significant cost of conducting research in South Sudan and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic mid-way through my data collection, which prevented me from returning to South Sudan for 18 months. I diverged significantly from the path – and timeline – that I had set out at the beginning. This chapter seeks to set out the methodology used in this thesis, and the decisions made along the way, following Luttrell’s assertion: that researchers cannot *“eliminate tensions, contradictions, or power imbalances, but... we can (and should) name them”* (Luttrell, 2000: 500). This involves explaining complex choices invariably encountered during any kind of ‘fieldwork’, and thinking about the decisions made in terms of what is lost and gained (ibid).

Conducting research in a country affected by ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis presents profound ethical challenges (Campbell, 2017; Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018), including the potential for harm both to research participants and researchers themselves (Mena & Hilhorst, 2021). Navigating these fundamentally shaped both the design of the research at the beginning, and the way in which the research unfolded, as is discussed below. The research was subject to ethical review at LSE at two points, including a full review prior to beginning data collection in late 2018, and an updated review in advance of re-starting the research in late 2021, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. I also participated, in 2018, in a week-long course on

‘Academic Research on Conflict and Contention’, which involved extensive discussion of research ethics and researcher safety, and which was exceptionally helpful. Beyond this, however, research ethics have been an ongoing, ‘everyday’ consideration, throughout the research (Fujii, 2012; Mena & Hilhorst, 2021), and a primary concern guiding day-to-day decision-making as the research has unfolded. This has taken numerous dimensions, and ethical considerations are considered throughout this chapter as well as in a section at the end.

2.2. Research design: ethnography and life history interviews

2.2.1. *Ethnography as epistemology and embodied practice*

At its core, this research was ethnographic. I understand ethnography, not ‘just’ as a method, but as an epistemology: an overarching approach, sensibility and ‘way of knowing’ that involves “*getting deeply into the rhythms, logics, and complications of life as lived*” (McGranahan, 2014: 24). For Ortner, an ethnographic stance is “*as much an intellectual (and moral) positionality – a constructive and interpretive mode – as it is a bodily process in space and time*” (Ortner, 2006: 42). It entails a commitment to what Geertz called “thickness” – to “*producing understanding through richness, texture, and detail*” (ibid: 43), encompassing an interest in the mundane and everyday, and an effort to grasp “*the complexity of social life as encountered rather than as expected*” (Krause, 2021: 331). Ethnographic researchers thus seek not (only) to answer particular questions, but rather to “*immerse themselves in the broader meaning-laden context of their interlocutors*” (Krause, 2021: 329), and, through immersion and the cultivation of an ethnographic sensibility, as well as through empathy and emotional engagement, to understand how people make sense of their world (ibid).

Ethnography is therefore a highly relational, reflexive and interpretivist approach, in that the ethnographer and their relationships to others are understood as central to the production of data and meaning (Fujii, 2017; McGranahan, 2018), and in that it relies on “*sensibility of the researcher in configuring diverse materials, modes of knowing and feeling, and temporalities in order to make meanings that can be used in the world*” (Pink, 2021: 30). This interpretivist perspective is important to understanding both how I carried out the research, as well as how I approached the analysis, as discussed further below. Ethnographic methods, and a concern with the everyday, are integral to the actor-oriented approach set out in the introduction (c.f. Hilhorst, 2018a; Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010; Long, 2001).

Anthropologists studying NGOs have often sought to immerse themselves in the activities of one organisation over an extended period of time, often leading to nuanced studies of everyday organisational life. This is not the approach I have taken for several reasons, including, particularly, a desire to engage with the significant diversity of South Sudanese NGOs, and concerns around anonymisation in a highly sensitive context, as discussed further below. Ensuring that all interviewees and organisations could be fully anonymised, and would not be identifiable even by people who are very familiar with the South Sudanese context, has been a primary concern throughout, and this felt much more achievable through engagement with interlocutors from a range of different organisations, than through participant observation with just one or two.

However, I would still describe this research as ethnographic, and have sought to cultivate ethnographic depth in numerous ways. In practice, for me, ‘doing’ ethnographic research meant several things, including, particularly, an effort to cultivate a depth of understanding through long-term engagement with a particular place, a concern with historical and contextual knowledge (including extensive reading), language skills, and an effort to build relationships that went beyond a one-off interview encounter. It also meant adopting an open-ended, flexible and exploratory approach, remaining open-minded about the themes and issues to explore (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), and embracing serendipity and intuition (Bajc, 2012; Pink, 2021; Rivoal & Salazar, 2013). It also meant the use of a particular set of methods, including in-depth and relatively unstructured life history interviews, along with observations, informal interviews and conversations, and daily notetaking. I prioritised engagement over time, often remaining in touch with people, meeting multiple times and, where possible, observing parts of their work.

2.3. On life histories

Life history interviews form the methodological core of this thesis, and were one of the main ways in which I sought to gain ethnographic depth, or ‘thickness’ (c.f. Ortner, 2006). Yarrow notes that for some anthropologists, life histories are a *“poor substitute for the density of social life and the intimacy of social relations”* (Yarrow, 2008). Yet, life histories have long formed part of the anthropologist’s toolkit (Atkinson, 1998; Fetterman, 2020). They can provide rich empirical detail not easily gleaned through other methods, including insights into subjectivities, identities and emotions (Chamberlain & Leydesdorff, 2004), and into *“the emotion of lived identities and experience”* (Lewis, 2008b: 575).

There are many different strands of and approaches to life history research, across different disciplines. The popularity of the life history method in the social sciences grew in the first part of the twentieth century, before declining in the 1950s, as positivist approaches became dominant (Lewis, 2008b). In the 1980s and 1990s, life history methods experienced a resurgence (Elliott, 2005), in line with the interpretivist turn across several fields. In anthropology, this included the ‘repositioning of the individual’, with growing interest in individual lived experience emerging in tandem with growing distrust of essentialised representations of peoples, groups, institutions and classes as coherent entities (Frank, 1995: 145). Ethnographies written from feminist standpoints argued that such essentialised representations of groups obscured members’ “*diverse experiences, contested desires, and unequal resources*” (ibid.: 145). More broadly, across the social sciences, life history methods were growing in popularity, linked, in part, to a growing interest in people’s lived experiences, an interest in temporality and the life course, a rejection of positivism, and a turn towards more flexible, participant-directed research methods (Elliott, 2005; Ojermark, 2007). Though the terms are often used interchangeably, life history methods may be understood as a part of (but not coterminous with) the wider movement and tradition of oral history research (Jackson & Russell, 2010), often linked to social and political projects seeking to document lives, experiences and histories omitted or excluded from written records, and at risk of being ‘hidden from history’ (ibid.: 3). Life history interviewing is now well-established across numerous social science disciplines, including anthropology, sociology and psychology (Fielding, 2011), education (Dhunpath, 2000) and geography (Jackson & Russell, 2010).

There were several reasons life histories were chosen for this study. Life histories are a particularly in-depth approach to interviewing, with potential to generate rich description, including “*a high level of historical depth and ethnographic detail*” (Lewis, 2008b: 561), and to lead to unexpected insights, prompting researchers to question their own assumptions (ibid.). They can provide a nuanced source of data about the complex intersection of structure and agency, of clear relevance to the actor-oriented approach underpinning this study. As Ojermark writes, the careful analysis of life history interviews can provide insights into how “*individual agency and structural conditions meet and interact, as well as how changes occur*” (Ojermark, 2007: 4). Spronk, for example, uses ethnographic life history interviews to explore how people act upon particular ‘conditions of possibility’ in order to pursue social mobility, shedding light on the making of Ghana’s middle classes. People’s biographies, she argues, “*open up vistas of the experiences and evaluations of life as well as the era in which lives enfolded*” (Spronk, 2020: 472). They provide insights

into agency as the ‘micropolitics of change’, located “*at the intersection of larger structures and personal experiences*” (ibid: 473), and can make visible how people navigate hierarchies, inequalities and opportunities, in the context of particular political-economic structures (ibid).

Relatedly, the life-history method helps provide historical depth to the study, enabling greater attention to context, and to continuity and change over time. As Musson argues, because lives move ‘resolutely’ through history and structure, the telling of life histories requires ‘constant’ reference to historical change, in society and in organisations (Musson, 2004); life histories thus tell us not just about one life, but about how people “*interact with the whole*”, linking individual experiences and identities with wider history and politics (Atkinson, 1998, in Lewis, 2008: 127). They can tell us about how individual experiences and aspirations, organisational narratives and trajectories, and national histories and politics intertwine, as very clearly seen, for example, in Yarrow’s work (2008, 2011).

This element of historical depth and change over time was important to this study. Life histories were employed with the aim of understanding people’s encounters with NGOs over many years, their experiences of work within the aid industry, and the processes that led them to found, lead or work for a South Sudanese NGO. Focusing only on an interviewee’s current place of work felt unsatisfactory, given that many had engaged extensively with numerous different organisations, in various capacities, including as volunteers, employees and government counterparts, and indeed also as recipients of aid projects and programmes. Interlocutors’ perspectives on the aid industry were thus often shaped by encounters and experiences with varied organisations, in different locations, over many years and sometimes decades, and life history narratives provided insights into encounters with and experiences of work in many different organisations and institutions. In addition, many South Sudanese NGOs have been founded only relatively recently. The life history approach allowed me to engage with the longer-term experience and knowledge held by many South Sudanese NGO workers, and to look beyond the relative ‘youth’ of many South Sudanese NGOs, considering instead the longer-term life histories and career trajectories of their founders and staff.

Life history interviews were also a way to differentiate and distance the study from existing research on South Sudanese NGOs, and on ‘localisation’ in South Sudan. Such studies, as discussed in the introduction, tend to approach these organisations from the perspective of the international humanitarian system, focusing primarily on their strengths and weaknesses relative

to international organisations, on the challenges and barriers they face in participating in the international humanitarian system. Knowledge on South Sudanese NGOs is also produced and constructed through the lens of project reports, proposals, audits and capacity assessments. As one interlocutor, a South Sudanese staff member working for an international NGO, commented, when I explained my research, “*we see these organisations [South Sudanese NGOs] through the window of our reporting templates*”.¹⁷ This study sought to move beyond an approach that views South Sudanese NGOs as singular, bounded entities, and to examine, instead, the longer-term personal and professional histories, career trajectories and aspirations of their founders and staff, as well as how they are socially and politically positioned in South Sudanese society. In this way, and as set out in the introduction, the study sought to build on and contribute to a wider body of work interested in the everyday lives, perspectives, and personal and professional histories of people working in the aid and development industries, in which life histories have been used to great effect (see, *inter alia*, Baillie Smith & Jenkins, 2012; Heathershaw, 2016; Lewis, 2008a; Roth, 2015b).

It is important to recognise what Yarrow (2008), Stanley and Temple (2008) and others term the ‘performative’ aspects of life histories: that the telling of a personal history, in a particular encounter, is always “*intended to do things in the present*” (Yarrow, 2008: 338, emphasis in original). Narratives are social practices, “*tied to a specific context, articulated to achieve particular purposes, and socially performative in character*” (Stanley & Temple, 2008: 279). As Fielding (2011) notes, there is no ‘pure’ life history – they are always the product of a particular encounter, to which interviewer and interviewee bring their own interests. What people say cannot be separated from the context of the narration (Jackson & Russell, 2010; Stanley & Temple, 2008). This makes them no less ‘valid’, but does mean (as with any research) the context of the ‘telling’ needs to be kept in mind.

In line with the interpretivist approach set out above, life history interviews are understood here not as windows into a fixed historical reality or unmediated ‘truth’, but rather as a form of data “*through which people (re)presented themselves and gave meaning retrospectively to their life course*” (Spronk, 2020: 473), in the context of a particular encounter and relationship between interviewer and interviewee (Fujii, 2017). As Fujii depicts in her articulation of ‘relational interviewing’, data and meaning are understood, not as existing in some freestanding, objective form, prior to and separate from the research encounter; but rather as emerging dynamically from the interaction and relationship between the interviewee and interviewer, within a specific social context, at a

¹⁷ Fieldnotes, November 2021

particular moment in time. The goal of interviewing, then, is not to ‘extract’ data from participants. Rather, interviewing is understood as a learning process that “*enables the researcher to gain insight into participants’ worlds through interaction and dialogue*” (Fujii, 2017: 22).

2.4. Research in practice

2.4.1. Patchwork ethnography

My overall approach is best described as a form of ‘patchwork ethnography’, a term coined by Anna Tsing (2005) and developed by Günel et al. (2020). Patchwork ethnography refers to research efforts that may draw upon multiple, shorter-term trips and on multiple data sources, while maintaining the “*long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterizes so-called traditional fieldwork*” (Günel et al., 2020: 2). One of the premises of patchwork ethnography is that research can be both fragmentary and rigorous, stitching together data from different sources. It is intentionally different from one-time, short, instrumental research trips, instead maintaining the long-term commitments to people and place, and the depth of knowledge, engagement and understanding, that characterises ethnographic research. However, it works *with*, rather than against, the “*gaps, constraints, partial knowledge, and diverse commitments that characterize all knowledge production*” (ibid: 3), taking into account issues including personal, financial and political constraints, the demands and precarisation of contemporary work within universities, and the particular challenges posed to ethnographic research during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Longevity of immersion has long been a hallmark of ethnographic research, alongside a sense of competitiveness over what constitutes ‘legitimate’ fieldwork (Cearns, 2018). However, Krause (2021) highlights that there are many reasons – practical, ethical and emotional – why researchers might adopt a strategy of limited or uneven immersion, particularly when conducting research in contexts of conflict. In such cases, long-term engagement may be better achieved through multiple shorter trips (ibid). As Krause highlights, returning to the ‘field’ after time away can earn the researcher trust (Krause, 2021), as well as creating opportunities for reflection and analysis between visits, enabling a recursive, iterative approach (c.f. Fetterman, 2020; Krause, 2021). Indeed, this is the approach adopted by several recent students conducting doctoral research in South Sudan: Merethe Skårås, for example, conducted her research on teaching and learning history in secondary schools in South Sudan using ‘focused ethnography’, involving intense data collection over a short period in 2014 (Skårås, 2018), Sara de Simone conducted four two-month trips between 2010 and 2013, and conducted research, in parallel, for an NGO (De Simone,

2016), and Gabriella Daoust conducted her research over ten months in conjunction with a study commissioned by UNICEF (Daoust, 2018).

My own research unfolded through a patchwork of different phases, partly as a pragmatic response to the challenges of conducting research in South Sudan, and partly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In total, I spent eight months in South Sudan. This was less time than I had originally envisaged, and one of the main implications of the pandemic was that – with less time in which to conduct physical data collection – the study has ended up relying more on interview data, and less on observation, than I had originally intended. However, this also had an unexpected upside: it introduced a longitudinal perspective to the research which proved invaluable, creating opportunities for repeat interviews and conversations and providing insights into dynamics of change over time. I set out these phases in the section below.

Background and beginnings

Several years prior to beginning my PhD, I had worked, in the UK, for a small international NGO that worked with national organisations in South Sudan (amongst other places), and had visited Juba and Wau. This shaped my interest both in the position of domestic NGOs in the international aid industry and in South Sudan. Sometime later, in 2017, for my master's thesis, I examined 'localisation' as a case study of a reform process in the humanitarian industry, drawing on interviews with individuals variously involved in shaping discussions around localisation in the run-up to, and during, the 2016 WHS, on document analysis, and on social movement and organisational theory. Each of these experiences played a role in shaping the subsequent articulation of my doctoral research proposal.

South Sudan made sense as a location for this research for numerous reasons, including the long history of international humanitarian intervention in the country, the distinctive role southern Sudan has played in the development of the anthropology of aid, and the far-reaching changes that have taken place in the international aid industry in recent years, as set out in the introduction. Intertwined with this was the recent and significant increase in the number of South Sudanese NGOs, both in general, and involved in the internationally led humanitarian response.

Phase one

I began my data collection in October 2018 with a scoping trip to Juba, in which I met with the directors and staff of several South Sudanese NGOs to gauge perspectives on my planned research. I asked contacts and friends for suggestions for people to speak to. I met with individuals from ten South Sudanese organisations on this trip, many of whom I remained in contact throughout the remainder of my research.

Phase two

I began the research in earnest in 2019. I spent another five months in South Sudan, conducting a mixture of interviews and observations, primarily in Juba and Wau, with short (one week) trips to Ganyiel and Yambio. This phase involved a considerable amount of familiarisation and preparatory work, as I sought to build relationships, to understand the NGO landscapes, and to work out the practicalities of my research. I began learning Juba Arabic, and obtained permission for my research from the South Sudanese Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology (MoHEST).

Alongside my PhD research, I also worked during this period on a study undertaken by the Firoz Lalji Institute for Africa (FLIA) at the LSE on the ‘historical and political dynamics of the NGO sector in South Sudan’, funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) South Sudan office. The FCDO’s proposed research questions for this study were very similar to the questions that I was already exploring in my PhD. I played a central role in designing our proposed approach, and in writing the proposal submitted by LSE, which was also based on the collection of life history interviews. I saw this as an opportunity to contribute to a policy-oriented study, with the potential for greater engagement with and impact on policymakers and practitioners than would be possible through my PhD alone, and to work with a wider team of South Sudanese researchers. My involvement with this study, particularly at an early phase of my research, while I was still finding my feet, was also helpful logistically in several ways. It helped me to build a greater degree of institutional support around my research, and enabled me to travel to more locations within the country than would have been feasible on my own, with short visits to Ganyiel and Yambio, places I had not previously been. It enabled me to travel within the country using UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) flights – a condition of my health and safety approval from LSE was that I would not use commercial airlines, which have a poor safety record in South Sudan. UNHAS flights cannot be booked by individuals but only by humanitarian organisations. It also provided unique insights into policy discussions taking place around localisation in South Sudan at the time, including through meetings and

dissemination events with the FCDO and with other donors and international organisations in South Sudan.

I therefore found myself conducting two research projects in parallel, a position not uncommon to PhD students conducting research in South Sudan in recent years (see, e.g. Daoust, 2017; De Simone, 2016). During 2019, I conducted 52 interviews, as well as beginning to conduct observations and build relationships, and had innumerable informal conversations. Some of these interviews were first analysed as part of the LSE policy report, in which they formed part of a much wider set of data. However, they have been fully re-analysed as part of this thesis, in more depth and from a different theoretical and academic perspective. I always explained to interviewees that I was a PhD student, and that I was conducting research both for the policy-oriented LSE study and for my own PhD research. I returned to the UK in late September, to contribute to the writing up of the policy report, as well as to consolidate the data I had collected so far and plan for next phase of my research.

Phase three

I returned to South Sudan in February 2020, intending to stay for several months, and to conduct further interviews and more in-depth participant observation within NGO offices. I spent time in Juba and Wau, visiting people I had met the previous year, conducting repeat interviews and seeking to put arrangements in place for further observations. However, by mid-March, the COVID-19 pandemic was escalating and the situation in the UK was worsening. With borders closing, and cautious of the risk of being away from home indefinitely with limited resources, during a pandemic, I decided to return to the UK. I experimented with remote methods, but the limited access to, and poor quality of, internet in South Sudan made this difficult, particularly for life history interviews, given their length and relational nature, and the importance of rapport between interviewer and interviewee, and so I did not feel that remote methods could replace further in-person data collection. When it became clear that travel was not going to be feasible for some time, I took a six-month interruption from my PhD. Amongst other things, during this period I worked on a study exploring how South Sudanese NGOs and local authorities had been impacted by and involved in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, as part of which I conducted an additional five remote interviews with South Sudanese NGO staff, and a briefing paper for the South Sudan Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) on localisation and conflict sensitivity, which included two online roundtable meetings with participants from 15 South Sudanese NGOs.

I resumed my PhD in mid-2021 and returned to South Sudan in October of that year.¹⁸ I spent two months in Juba and Wau between October and December 2021. I returned to the MoHEST, seeking renewed permission for the research, given the time that had passed. During this trip, I focused on conducting in-depth life-work history interviews with individuals from a wide range of organisations, and in various positions within organisations, as well as on catching up with and re-interviewing people that I had met in 2019 and 2020, and conducting further observations of NGO events and activities. This trip was more intensive than the earlier phases, and, having been unable to physically be in South Sudan for eighteen months (and, with limited time left on my PhD funding), I tried to make the most of my time, filling every moment I could with interviews, informal catchups, and observations. Some people wanted to meet during working hours, others at evenings and weekends, and balancing these, I was able to fill most of my time. During phase three, I conducted another 69 interviews. By the end of this trip, I felt that I had reached ‘saturation’ to some degree: while every interview was different and contained new ideas, I was also hearing similar themes repeatedly.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a long and unplanned gap in my data collection. However, it also had an unexpected benefit: it introduced a longitudinal perspective to my research that I had not originally envisaged, but which proved extremely helpful. I remained in contact with many interlocutors throughout 2020 and 2021, and when I returned to South Sudan in late 2021, I was able to re-interview people that I had first met or interviewed in 2018 and 2019. This cast in stark relief the ‘boom and bust’ nature of the NGO sector in South Sudan: some of the organisations that had appeared to be on the up-and-up in 2019 were now dormant, while offices that were empty in 2018-19, with staff laid off and no active projects, were, by late 2021, a hive of activity. People’s perspectives and priorities had also often changed in the intervening period, and re-interviewing people I had met in 2018 or 2019, remained in touch with, and then returned to in late 2021 yielded some of the most in-depth and nuanced data. This also allowed me to share my own emerging reflections and analyses with people, when we met again for informal conversations or for follow-up interviews, and to check some of my own assumptions and interpretations, as well as to explore changing perspectives and experiences over time, to clarify points from earlier interviews, or return to topics from earlier conversations.

¹⁸ Although travel between South Sudan and the UK had resumed much earlier, and I was aware that international aid workers had long since begun returning to the country, I felt that the threshold for resuming research was higher. For me, this meant waiting until I had been vaccinated, until case numbers were lower in the UK (they had been low in South Sudan for some time, though testing was limited), and until I had the ability to test myself regularly, all with the aim of reducing the risk that I would be transmitting the virus.

Also significant was that many of the phase three interviews built upon a pre-existing relationship, including the use of repeat interviews. While in 2019 I was often meeting people for the first time, at least half of the 2020 and 2021 interviews were with people I already knew. This included repeat interviews with people that I had previously interviewed, but also interviews with people I had met during earlier phases of the research but had never formally interviewed. This, I felt, often made a significant difference to the interview; the quality of the relationship was better, and there was greater ease and informality. In several ways, my experience resonates with that of Vincent (2013), amongst others, who notes that research outcomes can be enhanced through a process of repeat interviewing, particularly where a high degree of trust between researcher and participants is required.

In sum, the data collected during the different phases bring somewhat different things to the research. Phases one and two helped provide a broad base of understanding, meeting individuals from a wide range of organisations, across four parts of South Sudan, providing a greater level of geographic diversity to the study. These earlier phases were also instrumental in helping me to find my feet, to begin building relationships and to form networks that were essential both for connections to interlocutors and for navigating the complex process of doing research in South Sudan. Phase three brought greater depth, with in-depth life-work history interviews in Juba and Wau that built on existing relationships, explored changes over time and filled gaps in earlier interviews. It is the latter set of interviews (2020 and 2021) that I draw on primarily in this thesis, but they would not have been possible without the earlier phases of relationship building and familiarisation. Though the recursive nature of the research was not planned, I feel in retrospect that it was richer and more rigorous as a result: the different phases created opportunities for reflection and analysis, to take a step back, and then to return, check insights and conduct further interviews.

2.4.2. *Research sites*

My choice of research sites within South Sudan was shaped primarily by access, security and serendipity, with most of the research taking place in the larger urban centres of Juba and Wau, which were already known to me and where I had contacts, as well as short trips to the smaller towns of Yambio and Ganyliel.

Juba, the national capital, is located in Central Equatoria State. It was an old garrison town, controlled by the Sudanese Government for much of the second Sudanese civil war. It expanded very rapidly following the 2005 CPA; between 2006 and 2011, it was perhaps *“the fastest-growing city in the world”*, as returning refugees and internally displaced people, jobseekers and new government workers flocked to the capital (Kindersley, 2019: 67). Like the rest of the country, it was deeply affected by the South Sudan’s civil war, with fighting within the city in 2013 and 2016, and, more generally, growing insecurity, economic breakdown and deepening poverty (ibid). Over 30,000 people sought refuge in one of the UN peacekeeping bases in the city, forming one of the country’s Protection of Civilians (POC) sites (IOM, 2016a). Juba is the centre of the South Sudanese government, and of the international aid industry in the country. Most international NGOs and UN agencies have their main offices in the city. Most of the larger South Sudanese NGOs are headquartered in the capital, or have a liaison office or officer in the city, alongside a plethora of smaller NGOs. Interviewees frequently emphasised how difficult it was to access funding without a presence in Juba, and non-Juba based organisations often expressed a sense of exclusion and frustration. A staff member of one, sub-nationally based NGO argued, for example, that South Sudan has *“a chronic problem of centralised systems. If you are not in Juba, it is like you are not anywhere, you are not existing. All sources of good things are attached to Juba.”*¹⁹ There were many similar quotes and examples. Juba is also an exceptionally expensive city, for both residents and visitors, and rents are very high, not least because of the large numbers of international organisations competing for offices and accommodation in the city.

Wau, in Western Bahr-el-Ghazal State, is one of South Sudan’s largest towns. The town is diverse, located at the intersection of different ethnic groups, including Dinka and Luo communities, and smaller groups often known collectively as Fertit (Leonardi et al., 2010). In the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was a significant *zariiba* (Pendle, 2023), a trading post for ivory and slaves, discussed in the next chapter. The town was a garrison town under the control of the Sudanese army for most of the second Sudanese civil war, while many of the rural areas were controlled by the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). In 2012, there were protests in Wau over proposals to relocate the county administrative headquarters outside the town, and at least eight peaceful protestors were killed by government security forces; more were killed and injured during clashes that followed, and many people were arrested, including perceived opponents of the government (Amnesty International, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2013). In late 2015, fighting between government and opposition forces in and around the town

¹⁹ Interview, 20 August 2019

intensified. Government soldiers attacked, killed and detained civilians, and destroyed homes, forcing tens of thousands of people to flee (Human Rights Watch, 2016; see also Vuylsteke, 2018). During the fighting in and around Wau, people sought shelter in local church compounds, in the town Cathedral, and the compound of the South Sudan Red Cross, as well as in a POC site adjacent to the UN base in the town (see IOM, 2016; Nield, 2016; UN OCHA, 2016), and locally-based NGOs and churches were involved in responding to the needs of those displaced. It is a hub for NGOs in the region; there are several international NGOs and UN agencies with offices in the town, as well as a small number of national, Juba-based NGOs that have established offices and activities in the area. There are also many local, Wau-based NGOs, some of them with long histories and others more recently formed, some of which receive international humanitarian funding via subcontracting or partnership arrangements with international NGOs, UN agencies, and occasionally larger national NGOs, as well as numerous community-based organisations and associations.

Ganyliel is a small town in Panyijar County, in southern Unity State. Panyijar is a predominantly Nuer area, that was controlled by opposition forces for much of South Sudan's recent war (Kim et al., 2020). It is geographically isolated, located within the Sudd swamplands and prone to flooding. While much of northern and central Unity State suffered extensively during Sudan's second civil war in the 1980s – 2000s, Panyijar had a relatively different experience; the Sudan Armed Forces and allied militia *“never really penetrated the far south and, to some extent, it has always been something of a safe haven for the Nuer”* (Johnson et al., 2016: 32). Although Unity State as a whole saw some of the worst violence of South Sudan's recent war from 2013 (see Craze & Tubiana, 2016), again Panyijar remained relatively stable; there were some attacks in the area, but they were quickly repulsed, and atrocities were not seen to the same degree as elsewhere in Unity State (Johnson et al., 2016; see also Kim et al., 2020). As a result, many people sought refuge in Panyijar; in 2018, there were an estimated 74,888 internally displaced people in the county, 30% of whom were in Ganyliel town (IOM, 2018). Those who were displaced were primarily supported by, and integrated into, local communities (see Johnson et al., 2016). The town has an airstrip, and since the 1990s has hosted a small number of international NGOs, as well as a growing number of national NGOs, alongside smaller community-based organisations.

Yambio is on the south-western edge of the country, in Western Equatoria State. It is located in the country's fertile 'Greenbelt' agro-ecological zone and is a predominantly agricultural area (FEWSNET, 2018). It is relatively well-connected to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC),

Central African Republic (CAR) and Uganda. Several locally based associations and organisations were formed in the 2000s, to support people affected by Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) attacks. Initially, following the outbreak of conflict in December 2013, the area remained relatively peaceful, but conflict escalated from 2015. Yambio is a hub for UN agencies and international and national NGOs organisations operating across Western Equatoria. There are also numerous, well-established local NGOs, formed and based in and around Yambio or elsewhere in Western Equatoria, and an active network coordinating civil society organisations in the state.

In each place, I stayed mostly in international NGO compounds, or occasionally in hotels, and I followed the security procedures of international organisations, including abiding by curfews. In Juba, I travelled by car, with a taxi driver that was well-known to me. In Wau, I found it easier to move around independently. Taxis were not available in the same way and places were closer together, so I travelled mostly on foot. I also travelled by foot in Yambio and Ganyiel.

I also felt, over the course of my research and as my language skills improved, that learning Arabic made a significant difference to how I was perceived, differentiating me from many expatriate aid workers and functioning, as Vetta (2018: 38) describes, as a “*symbolic resource*”, helping to build trust and demonstrating commitment. Nonetheless, in numerous ways, I have been linked to and have relied upon the infrastructure of the international humanitarian industry, which will inevitably have affected how people perceived me, as is discussed further below.

2.4.3. Interviews

Interviews largely took the form of ‘life-work’ histories, adapted from the approach depicted by David Lewis across a series of articles (Lewis, 2008a, 2008a, 2010), and also inspired by Silke Roth’s use of biographical interviews to explore experiences of people working in aid (Roth, 2015b). Lewis describes this approach as synthesising elements of life history and semi-structured interviews, with the focus of interviews being “*on a person's work, whether in the form of professional activity, volunteering or activism, as the main driver of the narrative*” (Lewis, 2008a: 127). Lewis, summarising the value of the life-work history method, writes that it:

provides perspective in terms of creating a keyhole into institutional context and history; gives a view of a trajectory of an individual career path that provides information about individual choice-making and transition; and offers rich description in the form of nuance and detail, as well as the emotion of lived identities and experience. (Lewis, 2008b: 574-575, emphasis in original).

Interviews were largely unstructured and open-ended. I developed interview templates, as prompts for myself, but I treated these very flexibly. Some interviewees talked at length with very little interjection from me, while other interviews involved more follow-up questions. I also tailored the templates ahead of every interview, making small amendments about questions to ask or themes to explore, based on what I knew about the interviewees and their organisation already. I also made handwritten notes during each interview about points to clarify or follow-up on (to avoid interrupting people, but also to remember topics to return to): these interview-specific questions and clarifications often comprised the majority of my interjections, rather than pre-defined questions. I aimed for interviews to be conversational and informal. In all interviews, I asked some questions and probed for more information, but the amount of intervention from me varied substantially from interview to interview, as did the questions I asked.

Interviews broadly fell into two parts, beginning with an open-ended narration phase, and followed by a questioning phase. In the first part of the interview, I focused on trying to get interviewees talking, mostly with small prompts and probes, rather than pre-defined questions. I opened by explaining the purpose of the interview and the aims of 'life-work histories', and then asked interviewees to start with their early lives, including where they were born and went to school. Interviews often proceeded from there with a minimum of intervention from me. Interviewees described their educational journeys, which, given the disruptions and dislocations of South Sudan's recent decades, were often complicated, taking place across different locations. I encouraged interviewees to talk me through the different places where they had worked (taking a broad view of work, which often involved a mixture of waged employment, small businesses and other activities). If needed, I asked interviewees about their first encounters with NGOs, about how they got their first jobs in the aid industry, about their reasons for moving between organisations (including, if applicable, between governmental and non-governmental roles, and between international and South Sudanese organisations) and their experiences of and reflections on different places of work. I also asked about other organisations they were or had previously been associated with (most had been involved with student, youth or community associations at various points, for example).

In the latter part of the interview, if there was time, I asked more specific questions, following up on earlier themes or on topics we had not yet discussed. These were often interviewee specific. I often asked organisational directors, for example, about how organisations were founded and

funded, and about how decisions were made about how and where to work. I asked founders about their aims and aspirations, and why they felt founding an NGO was the best way to achieve them. I asked staff of international organisations, if applicable, about their perspectives on and approaches to working with South Sudanese NGOs, and how they made decisions about who to work with. I asked about people's hopes and plans for the future.

In the case of repeat interviews, I ensured that I had transcribed the data in full beforehand, and that I read and re-read the transcripts closely prior to the interview. Where repeat interviews were conducted one or two years apart, I began by asking interviewees about how things had changed for them in the intervening period and usually allowed the interview to develop from there in a very open-ended way. I asked follow-up questions, including things that were missed during the first interview.

Most interviews lasted between one and three hours. I left the location of the interview up to the interviewee and sought to make myself as flexible as possible in terms of dates and timing. Some preferred to meet at evenings and weekends, and others during the working day. Interviewees almost always suggested that I come to their office, and often showed me around before or after the interview. I adapted my approach based on the time available. In some cases, interviewees had less than an hour, and so I conducted shorter, abridged versions of the interviews, usually prioritising the 'narration phase'. On two occasions, two interlocutors wished to be interviewed together,²⁰ and so I conducted adapted group interviews, while still seeking to follow a broad life-work history format. Generally, though, interviews took the form of life-work histories as described above.

I had originally envisaged that interviews with the staff of international organisations would take the form of key informant interviews. In practice, however, many of these interviewees had previously worked for South Sudanese NGOs, as employees, volunteers or directors. Even those that had not worked for a South Sudanese NGO themselves had nonetheless engaged with these organisations in different capacities, at different parts of their lives and from within different organisations. Some, for example, had worked on civil society strengthening programmes in the 2005-2013 period, and now engaged with South Sudanese NGOs as grantees from within international organisations. As a result, life history interviews proved more appropriate in many

²⁰ I am aware that this is not an ideal way to conduct life-history interviews but was keen to accommodate interlocutors' preferences.

cases. One of the strengths of the life-work history approach is that it allowed me sufficient flexibility to explore this range of experiences.

All interviews were conducted in English which, for all interviewees, was a language that they worked in regularly, and were comfortable speaking. I learned a reasonable amount of Arabic, and a small amount of Nuer and Dinka. I could converse with people in Arabic, but did not reach a level of fluency at which I would have been able to conduct interviews.

I obtained either written or verbal consent for every interview. I spent a considerable amount of time at the beginning of each interview explaining the purpose of the research, how data would be used, and setting out considerations relating to anonymity, as well as answering any questions interlocutors might have. I always emphasised that participation was voluntary, that there would be no material benefit to individuals or organisations from taking part and no repercussion from withdrawing, and that, if the interview did proceed, interviewees could choose not to answer any question, and to end the interview at any time. I explained the nature of the life history interviews and that, while I might ask some questions, it was up to interviewees what they wanted to share. I also sought permission for audio recording, making it very clear that it was absolutely fine if interviewees preferred not to be recorded. Occasionally, interlocutors said they would prefer me not to record, and in these cases, with their permission, I typed my notes, which allowed me to capture the interview largely verbatim. Sometimes, interviewees would share something that they said they did not wish to be used, or to be recorded, but that was for my own understanding, and I would turn off the recorder and stop taking notes. The vast majority of interlocutors said that they were happy to be recorded.

Identifying and approaching interviewees

I adopted a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Aware of the heterogeneity of South Sudanese NGOs, I sought to approach interviewees from a wide range of organisations, including explicitly seeking to include women-led organisations and organisations founded or based in different parts of the country, and seeking variation in terms of the size of organisation, focus or sector of work, and how long they have existed. Interviewees were identified through existing contacts, organisational websites, and by asking interlocutors for further recommendations. In the early phases of the research, I reached out to many prospective interviewees by email, using contact details found on websites. Later in the research, a snowballing technique became easier.

Interviewees came from a wide range of organisations. Organisations do not nest neatly into types, and it is not easy to delineate organisations in the analysis between, for example, ‘humanitarian’, ‘development’, ‘peacebuilding’ or others since, in practice many organisations work across these boundaries. At the time of my research, many were involved in humanitarian-oriented work, across various sectors and regions. Yet, this does not mean all saw themselves as predominantly humanitarian or relief-oriented organisations; many had been founded with a different goal, but because had shifted their focus because of the scale of humanitarian needs in the country and the overwhelmingly humanitarian-focused nature of funding available. They also varied significantly in size and structure. They ranged in size, from some of South Sudan’s largest national NGOs, with hundreds of staff and turnover of millions of dollars a year, mostly working to deliver large, subcontracted humanitarian programmes, to smaller, primarily voluntary organisations, including membership-based organisations, and small NGOs working in the arts, or on legal aid and advocacy. The dataset therefore includes interviews with individuals from a wide range of South Sudanese NGOs.

I sought actively to interview people in different positions within organisations. However, I was also careful not to ask NGO directors for connections to other people within their own organisations – I did not want people to feel pressure to speak to me because they had been asked to do so by their boss. Since I was often directed in the first instance to directors and senior staff, this made it more complicated to speak to people in different positions within organisations. In the latter stage of the research, I made a concerted effort to speak to people in more junior positions in South Sudanese NGOs, and to former staff members of South Sudanese NGOs – for this, I relied primarily on the recommendations of friends, and on interviewees recommending people outside their own organisations. Nonetheless, this remains a smaller group of interviewees, with the majority being senior staff members or directors. For interviewees currently working for international organisations, I sought to interview people who were currently or had previously been involved, in various ways, in funding or supporting South Sudanese NGOs, including individuals who had been involved in the various civil society strengthening programmes of the last twenty years, as well as individuals who had worked for, or run, South Sudanese NGOs in the past.

In total, over the course of my research, I conducted 126 interviews with 106 different people. This includes 101 life history interviews, 22 repeat or follow-up interviews and three key

informant interviews. Interviewees were of a wide range of ages, came from many different parts of the country and from different ethnic groups, and had highly varied backgrounds. Of 106 interviewees, 86 were male and 20 were female. This was despite a concerted effort on my part to interview women, and reflects the significant gendered inequalities within the aid industry in South Sudan, as well as the heightened barriers women face to founding, running and working for NGOs. With that said, several of the interlocutors that I spent the most time with, and came to know best, were women.

Of 106 interviewees, 53 were currently directors of South Sudanese NGOs, 24 were staff members of South Sudanese NGOs, five were volunteers, and four were former directors or coordinators of South Sudanese NGOs. 17 were currently working for international organisations, but had, in most of these cases, previously worked for South Sudanese NGOs. Three did not fit neatly into any category. All but three were South Sudanese. However, individual life histories tended to span a wide range of organisations and institutions (including national and international NGOs, government bodies, community associations and others) in a range of capacities and positions, and so interviews often provided a window into experiences of working in or engaging with several different organisations. Contracts in humanitarian organisations tend to be short and turnover in national NGOs is high, and so it was common for interviewees to have worked or volunteered for multiple national and international NGOs. Staff members of South Sudanese NGOs are often paid intermittently, blurring the line between staff and volunteers. Some interviewees were involved in multiple organisations simultaneously: for example, many NGO employees were also members of community associations. All this makes grouping interviewees neatly into categories more complicated.

2.4.4. *Observations*

Throughout the research, I sought to observe and, to some degree, participate in, NGO activities. I saw observation as a way of understanding a little more of the day-to-day rhythms of ‘NGO-ing’ in South Sudan, and of creating opportunities for more informal research encounters. More broadly, and in line with ethnographic convention, I also wrote detailed notes at the end of every day, which I typed up, involving a mixture of documentation of things that had happened, and reflections, analysis and ideas for points to follow up on. I anonymised field notes as I went along, ensuring that I did not record names of individuals or organisations, or identifying details.

I let people know that I was interested in observing NGO events and activities, and asked them to let me know if there anything it would be appropriate for me to join, observe and, in some cases, to participate in. People invited me to join them in a range of different activities. Examples included workshops on a range of topics, inter-agency meetings, a report launch and a fundraising event. I always clearly identified myself as a researcher. In this thesis, I primarily draw on and quote from the interview data, but these observations also helped inform my perspective, and contributed to relationship-building.

Observational data also comes from notes that I made after each interview, documenting my own observations and trying to capture some of the context and ‘feel’ to the encounter. For example, influenced in part by Smirl’s work on the spatiality of aid (Smirl, 2015), and by previous work on ‘bunkerisation’ in South Sudan (Duffield, 2010; Felix da Costa, 2012), I tried to observe as much as possible about the physical buildings and spaces I visited. For example, I wrote about the locations of offices within the towns, how the offices looked from the outside (the size of the building, the use of barbed wire, whether or not there was a signboard or logo), and about layout of the interior of the office (for example, how big the space was, how it was laid out, and what kind of things were on the walls). I did all this in a general way, that would not allow identification of the organisation. For example, rather than a specific location, I wrote about the broad area where the office was located, the distance from the centre of town or from the main road. These offices varied hugely. Some, for example, closely resembled those of international organisations, with high walls and barbed wire separating them from the world outside, security guards on the gate and ID required to get inside. At the other end of the spectrum were organisations located in small concrete buildings or *tukuls* (thatched-roof, circular buildings), perhaps in fenced-off areas but into which anyone could enter. Some had spaces on their compounds that were used for community meetings, and several were hosted on church compounds.

2.5. Analysis

I transcribed all interviews in full, seeking to capture the conversation exactly. I removed any reference to names of individuals or organisations as I transcribed, to ensure completed transcripts were fully anonymised. Transcription was a very long process, taking over 350 hours, and I ended up with a large amount of data.

To manage this, I adopted a two-fold approach to analysis, drawing on elements of narrative and thematic analysis. As Smith (2016) writes, while most forms of qualitative analysis involve breaking data apart into smaller, more manageable chunks, in narrative analysis, the researcher is wary of ‘over-coding’ the data. Instead, the aim is to keep the story intact in order to “*preserve and examine the wealth of storied detail contained in it*” (ibid: 210). I conducted an abridged form of narrative analysis, adapted to meet the needs of this research. First, after transcribing all interviews, I read and re-read each transcript. I then sought to summarise each interview into a small number of paragraphs, incorporating key quotations, and then noted down several points reflecting on what I considered to be the main insights or themes from the account (analytical memos). This was akin to Smith’s discussion of ‘theme-ing’ rather than coding the data (Smith, 2016). This process was a way of getting close to the data, and represented an effort to analyse and theorise from each interview as a whole, rather than broken down into thematic chunks.

While aware of the risk of ‘over-coding’ the data, I did also conduct a process of thematic analysis, using NVivo 12. I had ended up with a significant amount of data, and this felt like a way of making it more manageable. This entailed a more ‘horizontal’ process of analysis (c.f. Hunter, 2010), capturing themes across interviews. However, by this point I was familiar with the data and so even when segments were broken up thematically, I knew the context of these segments and how they fitted into a wider interview. In the process of writing up, I continued referring back to my documents of interview summaries and analytical memos, to the coded data in NVivo, and, through NVivo, to the original transcripts.

2.6. Ethical issues and limitations

To my mind, the central ethical dilemma permeating this research, one that I have grappled with throughout and not fully resolved, is that many of the hierarchies and inequalities of the international aid system that are discussed in this thesis are replicated within the academic research industry of which I am a part. Power and funding are often held and controlled by northern institutions who win grants and subcontract southern-based researchers. Southern-based researchers and research institutions working on international research projects are often contracted on a short-term basis with significantly poorer remuneration, recognition and benefits than their international counterparts, while being required to carry out much of the actual data collection, demanding significant emotional and relational labour in much the same way as is discussed in the literature on ‘local’ aid workers. The ‘Bukavu Series’ blogs did an exceptional job of highlighting these inequities in the research industry in the context of the DRC, including in

terms of precarious labour and poor remuneration (Cirhuza, 2019; Cirhuza et al., 2019), exposure to physical and psychological risk (Mwaka Précieux, 2019), and influence over research design and visibility in outputs (Buhendwa Nshobole, 2020; Cirhuza, 2020; Mudinga, 2020). Together, the blogs serve as an *“indictment of the premeditated violence that persists in the process of academic knowledge production”*, and the ways in which this is *“responsible for the dehumanization and the erasure of researchers from the Global South”* (The Bukavu Series, 2021).

Processes of academic knowledge production – of designing, doing and leading research, of who gets cited, and who gets funded – in academic and consultancy work – are no less in need of change than the international aid sector. This is the case in South Sudan, as elsewhere. I do not have an easy resolution to this. However, I have sought to read, cite and collaborate with South Sudanese scholars and researchers throughout the timeline of my research, including through several of the projects I have been involved with alongside my PhD. I have also tried to be a good colleague and collaborator on projects in which I have been involved, and more generally to be useful to the South Sudanese scholars and researchers that I know, and from whom I have learned a huge amount. I will prioritise collaboration and co-authorship going forwards. In the meantime, it is worth restating that so many of the issues discussed in this thesis related to the hierarchies and inequities of the international humanitarian industry could equally be applied to academic knowledge production.

A second imperative ethical issue for research in South Sudan is anonymity and confidentiality. South Sudan is an immensely sensitive context for NGOs to operate in; civic space is tightly constrained, and NGOs and activists are subject to censure and surveillance from a powerful and repressive national security apparatus (Amnesty International, 2021; UN HRC, 2022). In addition, in their efforts to secure funding, reputation is crucial for NGOs. Ensuring the anonymity of research participants has been a primary concern throughout, and this has shaped both the way the research was conducted, and the way it has been presented here. This includes ensuring that neither individuals nor organisations are identifiable, including by people very familiar with the context. It is for this reason that I do not present individual life histories in detail (in the manner Yarrow, 2011, does, for example), but rather have broken the data up and present it thematically. Even with names removed, individual stories presented in detail could perhaps enable identification. I have also made sure to cite the interviews in such a way as to ensure triangulation is not possible, within or between texts, to ensure that different segments of the same interview cannot be pieced together, again, potentially enabling identification of

interlocutors by people who know the context well. This is why, for example, I have not included the precise date of an interview in footnotes, nor given interviews a unique code. Given the risks facing NGOs and activists in South Sudan, I have always erred on the side of caution, and have tried to ensure that a reader familiar with the South Sudanese NGO landscape could not identify interlocutors, even if some of the richness of the data is lost as a result.

As Fujii (2012) writes, the power imbalance between researcher and researched is often at the centre of ethical considerations and dilemmas. I was particularly conscious throughout that in a context such as South Sudan, where organisations receive much of their funding from foreign donors, foreign researchers “*can be implicitly associated with international networks, connections, and hopes of future funding*”, resulting in a sense of “*duty or obligation regarding requests from Western researchers*” (Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018: 4). In addition, in several ways, as noted above, I was visibly connected to the international humanitarian apparatus. As a result, I took particular care to make clear that I was a PhD student and academic researcher, and that there would be no material benefit to individuals or organisations from taking part, nor any repercussions from declining to participate, as noted above. To the best of my knowledge, this was always well-understood by my interlocutors. Indeed, many of my interlocutors had experience of doing research themselves, either in the course of their own university studies, or during their work with NGOs. They were often familiar with the process of doing research, including with processes for informed consent.

In addition, as Lewis (2008b) writes, life histories are a time intensive method that demand a lot of both researchers and participants. I was very aware that I was asking for time and personal stories from people, and offering little in return. However, people were often enthusiastic to participate, and, quite often, commented afterwards about having enjoyed the interview, or about it having been different from studies they had participated in in the past. People were exceptionally generous with their time, often talking at length and offering nuanced, thoughtful reflections. I reached out to many more people than participated in the study, and so I imagine that plenty of people who did not think the interview was worth their time simply did not respond.

There are also several limitations to the research methods described above, some of which I have sought to address in various ways, and some of which result in gaps that could be usefully explored through further research. The first is the predominantly urban nature of the research. To some degree, this made sense given the focus of the research, since the vast majority of South

Sudanese NGOs have offices within the towns, though many work in rural areas. Nonetheless, this remains a significant limitation, not least given that, in South Sudan, there are significant disparities between rural and urban areas. As Diing et al. (2021: 39) write, *“there is a lack of understanding of how community-based organizations (CBOs) and NGOs, which are primarily based in urban centres, are perceived by rural youth and whether this reinforces perceptions of marginalization”*. My thesis does not contribute to filling this gap, but rather privileges the perspectives of those living in urban areas. This is a gap that could be explored through further research.

A related limitation relates to the geographic scope of the research, which was constrained by funding and time. South Sudan is highly diverse, geographically and socially, and there are significant differences between and within states. I saw in my own research how significantly people’s experiences of working for and running NGOs varied from place to place. Juba and Wau are both major hubs for NGOs, and so I did engage with a wide range of organisations, and short visits to Yambio and Ganyiel provided further geographic diversity. Perspectives varied significantly both between and within these locations. In addition, during the latter stages of the research, while I was in Juba, I tried to mitigate this limitation in a small way by actively seeking to interview individuals from organisations working or based in different parts of the country. I interviewed individuals from organisations founded and working in all ten South Sudanese states, either while they were visiting Juba, or, occasionally, remotely. Nonetheless, the data and findings presented in this thesis certainly cannot be generalised to all South Sudanese NGOs, or all parts of the country. I have tried to be specific when reporting data, distinguishing, for example, between Juba-based and sub-nationally based NGOs, though I have not provided precise locations of interviewees in the write-up, because I did not want to risk compromising anonymity. More broadly, of course, it is crucial to recognise that the data and analysis presented in this thesis reflect interactions with particular individuals, from particular organisations, in particular places and at particular moments in time.

It is also important to point out what this study was and was not. This was a study focusing on people’s experiences of working within South Sudanese NGOs. It was not an evaluation of South Sudanese NGOs, nor an assessment of how these organisations are perceived by others, or of the relative effectiveness of their work. These are issues that have been explored elsewhere, as discussed in the introduction. In addition, the focus was predominantly on professional NGOs which, in this context, are typically registered with the government and solicit donor funding for their activities, rather than on South Sudan’s many and varied voluntary associations;

though the line between these is not always clear-cut, and numerous organisations were former associations that had registered as NGOs, for various reasons, including to facilitate access to funding. South Sudanese organisational and associational life is of course far vaster and more diverse than those professional NGOs connected to the international humanitarian industry, as is discussed in chapter four.

A final limitation relates to the process of analysis and writing-up. Interlocutors' perspectives, personal histories and experiences were immensely nuanced and varied. I have tried to draw out some analysis, while accounting for the nuance and heterogeneity in interlocutors accounts. Nonetheless, any attempt to analyse and generalise requires a degree of simplification, and, even with a full-length thesis, I have found it hard to do justice to the heterogeneity of people's accounts and experiences. As Tsing writes, in the quote opening this chapter, a 'rush of stories' cannot be neatly summed up. The thesis must be read with this in mind.

3. Re-historicising the ‘Will to Localise’ in South Sudan

3.1. Chapter introduction

The primary aim of this chapter is to provide historical context for the remainder of the thesis. The forces that have shaped South Sudan’s recent NGO boom lie deep in its history, and while perhaps easy to attribute growth in NGOs to a recent influx of humanitarian funding, the reality is more complex. Understanding this requires attention to the *longue durée*: to processes of marketisation, monetisation and commercialisation that have transformed South Sudan’s economy and placed ever greater importance on money; to the fraught, predatory arrival of ‘government’ in South Sudan, which has continued to influence processes of state formation and perceptions of the state; and to dynamics of class formation, in which NGOs are intimately entangled. It also requires attention to the long history of external intervention in southern Sudan, from the commercial and colonial incursions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to the large-scale humanitarian operations of the late twentieth century, all of which have contained efforts to work with and through ‘local’ actors in varied ways, with complex effects. Recent rhetoric around ‘localisation’ contains echoes of these very long histories of external interventions.

The chapter also aims, therefore, to trace the history of the ‘will to localise’ amongst external interveners in South Sudan, from the efforts of colonial authorities in the early twentieth century to govern on-the-cheap, to the notions of participation, capacity building and self-reliance that featured heavily in the international humanitarian and development interventions of the 1980s and 1990s. The ‘will to localise’ references the work of the anthropologist Tanya Murray Li on the ‘will to improve’ (Li, 2007). For Li, the will to improve draws attention to the ‘inevitable gap’ between ambition and accomplishment in improvement schemes, and to the remarkable persistence of the will to improve, despite repeated failures, shortcomings and unkept promises. She emphasises the continuities of the will to improve over time, remaining unconvinced by narratives of the ‘improvement of improvement’: instead, she writes, “*new programs routinely retain the limitations of the programs they replace*” (ibid: 275), with a striking capacity to absorb criticism. My aim in echoing Li’s phrasing is to point to the continuities in the approaches of external interveners in South Sudan, and to the persistence of the will to localise, which has been repeatedly recycled and repackaged within the shifting trends and fads of the humanitarian industry. In doing so, this chapter therefore seeks a ‘re-historicization’ (Lewis, 2009) of

humanitarian policy around localisation in South Sudan, and – together with chapter four – aims to provide to the thesis with a greater sense of historical depth.

The will to localise in South Sudan has a very long history, though one would not necessarily know it from recent discussions around localisation. Recent reports related to localisation in South Sudan, mostly commissioned by international agencies, pay little attention to history; most accounts look back no further than South Sudan's independence in 2011, or, at most, provide cursory descriptions of the humanitarian operations of the 1990s. This chapter, therefore, seeks to provide a deeper historical grounding to the discussions that follow. It argues that the will to localise is a relatively constant thread running through the history of colonial and post-colonial interventions in southern Sudan. Making this argument does not imply that there is "*nothing new under the sun*" (Lewis, 2009: 35), but it does serve to nuance claims to novelty and innovation within more recent localisation debates, and points to a degree of circularity within the aid industry in South Sudan.

The chapter is structured chronologically. It begins with the colonial and commercial incursions of the nineteenth century, because of the importance of this period for understanding dynamics of state formation, marketisation and monetisation in South Sudan, and for analysing the history of the 'will to localise' amongst external interveners. It then provides some context about post-independence Sudan, the first Sudanese civil war (1955-1972), the Sudanese Regional Government (1972-83), and the second Sudanese civil war (1983-2005), and examines the large-scale humanitarian operations in southern Sudan of the 1970s onwards, highlighting that South Sudan has, for decades, been a testing ground for trends in international humanitarian intervention. It ends just before the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), where the next chapter picks up. This chapter draws primarily on written sources and academic analyses. ReliefWeb²¹ and the Sudan Open Archive²² represented important sources of documents, particularly for the latter parts of the chapter, and I spent a considerable amount of time scouring these sites for insights into the relief operations of the 1980s and 1990s, reviewing monthly reports, funding appeals, and strategy documents. Evaluations of aid operations, including detailed reviews of Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) undertaken during its lifetime, also provided important insights (e.g. Duffield et al., 1995, 2000; Karim et al., 1996).

²¹ <https://reliefweb.int/>

²² <https://sudanarchive.net/>



United Nations Map of Sudan, 2007²³

3.2. Southern Sudan in the nineteenth century: Commercial and colonial incursions

Pre-colonial southern Sudan is often depicted as an isolated periphery, disconnected from wider historical events and trends, in part, by geographical remoteness (Johnson, 2016a; Kindersley, 2017). Johnson (2016a) strongly contests this, highlighting shared cultural ideas and practices,

²³ Available at <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Un-sudan.png> (accessed 25.4.2023)

linguistic continuities, and histories of movement and migration which, amongst other things, “undermine the assertion of South Sudanese cultural isolation and reestablish South Sudan’s place within the broader range of African history” (Johnson, 2016a: 41). Archaeological and linguistic evidence, too, paints a more complicated picture, pointing to long histories of migration, movement and cultural exchange (Ehret, 1982; Kay et al., 2019). A recent review article summarising archaeological research in South Sudan concludes that the past 5,000 years have been “*anything but culturally homogeneous*” (Kay et al., 2019: 530), with a diverse archaeological record that indicates “*dynamic landscapes and intriguing narratives of socioeconomic change and migration*” (ibid: 530).

Prior to 1840, this region lay largely beyond the reach of colonial state powers, and at the ‘furthest limits’ of long-distance commerce (Leonardi, 2013). There were state systems in some parts of South Sudan, including the relatively expansive Shilluk and Zande kingdoms; other South Sudanese societies functioned without states, depending on systems of social obligation, and organising themselves with the help of societal experts with powers of consensus-building rather than command (Thomas, 2015). The second half of the nineteenth century, however, saw the violent expansion of imperial and commercial forces into southern Sudan. This had radical repercussions, marking the beginning of southern Sudan’s incorporation into predatory, extractive and profoundly unequal global networks and markets. The region that is now South Sudan became part of the Turkiyya, the Ottoman-Egyptian administration in Sudan (1820-1885), then, following the Mahdist revolution, part of the Mahdiyya (1885-1898). A brief discussion of this period is relevant here, not least because, as Leonardi argues, it was “*foundational and formative*” in the history and memory of relations with the state in southern Sudan (Leonardi, 2013: 31), as well as setting in motion patterns of spatial inequality within southern Sudan, and between towns and rural areas, that remain relevant today.

The expansion of the Turkiyya into southern Sudan began in 1839, when a frigate captain in the service of the Egyptian government reached the rapids south of Juba, opening up a river route into southern Sudan (Thomas, 2015). He was quickly followed by well-financed commercial companies seeking to “*exploit the ivory (and later slave) potential of the White Nile*” (Johnson, 1992: 165). Under the Turkiyya, southern Sudan became incorporated into the state as its ‘exploitable hinterland’ (Johnson, 2016b). This period saw the establishment of the *ẓara’ib* [singular *ẓariba*], a network of fortified trading stations (Johnson, 2016a; Leonardi, 2013) created by independent commercial companies using private armies from the 1850s-70s (Johnson, 1992). The *ẓara’ib* system was central to the way in which southern Sudan was conquered, ‘pacified’ and governed

(Johnson, 1992, 2016a); it defined the ‘military-commercial’ character of slavery in the region, as well as enfolded southern Sudan into a “*network of international credit*” extending from the *z̧ara’ib* camps to companies in Khartoum, Egypt and Europe (Johnson, 2016a: 67). The *z̧ara’ib* housed commercial expeditions formed of sailors, pilots, soldiers and hunters recruited in Khartoum and organised into military units within the camps, as well as large numbers of slave residents and slave soldiers (Johnson, 1992). Slaves, as well as ivory, other animal products, and local food products, were exported through the camps (Johnson, 2016a). Demand for slaves, ivory and provisions fuelled escalating patterns of raiding by the *z̧ariba* forces of the surrounding areas (Leonardi, 2013). People living near the *z̧ara’ib* were often forcibly resettled around the camp to provide food and labour (Johnson, 2016a); some places became depopulated, as whole populations sought to evade the predations of the *z̧ara’ib* by moving further away, deep into rural areas (Johnson, 2016a). By 1868, there were more than 80 *z̧ara’ib* in Bahr-el-Ghazal alone (De Simone, 2016). Many of the *z̧ara’ib* became Egyptian government forts in the 1870s (Leonardi, 2013). In the 1880s, when the Mahdist revolution ended Turco-Egyptian rule in northern Sudan, the *z̧ara’ib* were abandoned, or taken over by Mahdist armies (Johnson, 2016a; Leonardi, 2013).

The events of the nineteenth century shaped relationships between southern and northern Sudan. Increased slave raiding in the south was fuelled by increasing indebtedness and impoverishment in northern Sudan, where people were subjected to new forms of land tenure, taxation and debt (Thomas, 2015; see also Johnson, 2016a, 2016b); this growing indebtedness in the north was, itself, the product of the incorporation of this region into global markets. The slave population in the north, on which the northern economy increasingly relied, was drawn largely from southern Sudan (Johnson, 2016a). This was justified through the creation of racial hierarchies, with slavery “*emphatically rank[ing] South Sudanese at the bottom of a new political order*” (Thomas, 2015: 52).

The *z̧ara’ib* system had far-reaching effects within southern Sudan, shifting relationships between and within groups, causing significant population movement and displacement, and establishing patterns of engagement between South Sudanese peoples and the state (Johnson, 2016a; Leonardi, 2013). The *z̧ara’ib* and the government forts that followed became South Sudan’s first towns and ‘nodes’ of state power, ‘broadcasting’ state authority over the surrounding countryside (Thomas, 2015: 37). There were profound spatial effects, with more development around the ‘nodes’ and less in the hinterland; this set out a pervasive pattern of uneven development and inequality, the effects of which continue to be felt to the present day (ibid). Furthermore, as

Thomas shows, although nearly every South Sudanese group experienced the violence and predation of this period, the pace and timing of this varied dramatically from place to place; as did the “*depth of commercial penetration and understanding of market ways*” (Thomas, 2015: 80). This left some groups better equipped than others to negotiate with, and extract benefits from, arriving external forces (ibid). Some groups mobilised together to resist foreign aggression, but slavers and government agents also intensified differences between groups by deploying them against one another, allying with nearby groups to carry out raids against more remote, resisting communities (Thomas, 2015).

This was not a simplistic picture of southern Sudanese peoples being overwhelmed by external forces. As Leonardi shows, there was significant engagement and adaption, and the people of South Sudan “*were not always or simply victims in the multiple encounters involved*” (Leonardi, 2013: 40). Different communities alternated between accommodation with and resistance to the new military-commercial powers (Johnson, 2016a). The political economy of the region already rewarded skills of interlocation, and ensured people were “*familiar with exchanging their property, products and services for expert guidance, intercession and protection*” (Leonardi, 2013: 40). This tendency to contract with expert authorities was extended to relations with the new military-commercial forces, and then the state (ibid.). For some individuals, entering into relations with the *zara’ib* could be a way to gain recognition, and protection for people and property. Some individuals and groups engaged with the new military-commercial forces in order to pursue local warfare, gaining access to the firepower of the merchants and, perhaps, displacing the predation of the raiders to communities further afield (Johnson, 2016a; Leonardi, 2013). Men who learned Arabic, and whose diplomatic and entrepreneurial skills enabled them to deal with the new military-commercial forces, could gain influence, setting up tensions with other forms of authority (Leonardi, 2013). The system of slave raiding offered opportunities for individuals and groups to “*ally with the firepower of the merchants, before their neighbours did so*” (Leonardi, 2013: 34); such individuals, by 1860, were already being described as ‘chiefs’, remembered locally for having struck bargains with the traders (Leonardi, 2013). Relations between the *zara’ib* and the satellite populations around their outskirts were mediated by interpreters and trading agents, or ‘trading chiefs’ who offered limited protection to their ‘subjects’ from the predations of the trading centres; these individuals gathered new communities around them in the vicinities of the *zara’ib* (Leonardi, 2013: 40).

Both individuals and communities thus allied with colonial and commercial forces in ways that shifted relationships between and within groups, and certain skills (such as knowledge of Arabic) acquired new power or capital. By adopting a role as interlocutors between local communities and colonial forces, some individuals were able to attain new socio-political and economic power and status, creating new opportunities and inequalities. Others gained power by *contesting* the ability of the arriving traders, slavers and *hakuma* [government] to be able to inflict lethal and devastating violence with impunity, as Pendle (2023) shows in relation to the making of new divine authorities during this period, and the reshaping and reassertion of divine cosmologies: new authorities such as Kolang Ket, for example, one of the first prophets of the western Nuer, nuanced and remade cosmologies in ways that “*contest[ed] the unrestrained power of the hakuma*” (Pendle, 2023: 50).

This period, in sum, saw extraordinary depredation and violence meted out by external state forces, but also set in motion particular ways of bargaining with, laying claims upon, and seeking protection from the state and external forces, as well as new roles for intermediaries in this process. It established patterns of inequality and uneven development – between northern and southern Sudan, but also within the south – that set the scene for later conflicts. In addition, under the Turkiyya, outsiders increasingly began to order and delineate South Sudan’s complex, porous societies into discrete tribes led by single ‘chiefs’ (Thomas, 2015). This was more legible to outsiders than the reality of South Sudan’s social complexity. There were also efforts to “*force or tempt the population into market-oriented production*”, including through the monetisation and the collection of taxes in cash, and encouragement of the production of cash crops for the world market and to fuel the industries of the colonising countries (Bjørkelo, 1997: 39, 44-45). These trends accelerated with the arrival of British colonial forces.

3.3. The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium

In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, southern Sudan became a focus of British colonial expansion, spurred by the interests of missionaries and explorers, by French and Belgian competition, and by efforts to control the Nile Basin in order to secure British interests in Egypt (Leonardi, 2013). In 1898, the Mahdist state was defeated by British and Egyptian forces, and in 1899 the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of Sudan was established. The Anglo-Egyptian government established itself in and extended out from the military-commercial centres established during the previous century, often incorporating the *ḡara’ib* sites as new administrative posts (Johnson, 1992; Leonardi, 2013). Throughout the first part of the twentieth

century, colonial predation, brutal ‘pacificatory’ raids and the exploitation of labour through “*co-opted ‘chiefs’*” shaped the development of the state in South Sudan (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017: 4). There was widespread southern Sudanese opposition to colonial rule, and the authorities of the new Condominium ruled largely through predation, coercion and force. The state was largely viewed as a “*vague, distant and largely alien entity... historically experienced as a series of extractive and unwelcome impositions*” (Leonardi, 2005: 9). In the first 32 years of the Condominium, there were only eight years in which there was no significant armed confrontation between a southern Sudanese community and government forces; in addition to these were smaller patrols, marches and police actions, including the collection of taxes by force (Johnson, 2016a).

This period requires some attention, not only as important context for the remainder of the thesis, but also because it speaks to the long history of efforts by external actors in southern Sudan to ‘localise’ their authority – including to leverage local knowledge, and to manage the challenges of ‘governing’ southern Sudan’s vast and diverse landscape and social complexity by mobilising and contracting with local actors. Colonial efforts to identify and instrumentalise actors with local legitimacy and rootedness find their echo, many decades later, in efforts to ‘localise’ humanitarian aid. This history also illustrates how South Sudanese individuals and groups have responded and adapted to these efforts in varied ways.

From the beginning of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, there was a focus on chiefship as the basis for local government in southern Sudan (Leonardi, 2013). Condominium authorities established a decentralised system of provincial administration, under colonial officers with ‘local experience and knowledge’ who, in turn, relied on “*local allies or intermediaries to create a basic administration “suitable to the people”*” (Leonardi, 2005: 49-50). Among Condominium government officials there was mistrust of educated Sudanese or Egyptian officials and a preference for ‘rural notables’ as a supposed ‘natural link’ between the government and people (ibid: 50). There was, already in this period, an emphasis on the ‘local’, which, as, Leonardi writes, “*reflected the self-awareness of the early colonial state of its intrinsic ignorance; perhaps within a small local unit of administration knowledge could be obtained and accumulated more easily*” (Leonardi, 2005: 50). Decentralisation also reflected the limited resources of the early colonial state, which sought to govern across a vast and diverse territory with a limited number of officers (ibid).

The early years of colonial rule thus saw the constitution of the chiefship ‘of government’, largely distinct from other forms of authority (Leonardi, 2013). In attempting to ‘resurrect’ what they

perceived as precolonial authorities, British administrators created new institutions of leadership (Johnson, 2016a). The chiefs were not, generally, the “*persuaders, mediators and nature experts who shared the leadership of South Sudan’s many democratic societies*” (Thomas, 2015: 96). Some of the first leaders recognised as chiefs by British colonial authorities were men who had gained power through access to guns and knowledge of Arabic during the previous century (Johnson, 2016a). In some places, spiritual leaders such as spear masters, whose authority came from their role in resolving disputes, were appointed as chiefs (Wandu et al., 2016). However, the lineages or individuals with the greatest spiritual authority were not always or necessarily the ones who took on the role of ‘government chief’; rather, there was often a separation between government chiefship and other forms of knowledge and authority, setting up a “*lasting moral ambiguity around chiefship*” (Leonardi, 2013: 55). There were significant risks and burdens associated with government chiefship, perhaps leading in some cases to delegation of the role by other authorities, or a process of ‘splitting power’ (Leonardi, 2013). New, government chiefship was established in varied ways, including through individuals ‘approaching’ the state, actively seeking out the new colonial forces in order to make claims upon them and to draw upon their power (Leonardi, 2013), not dissimilar to the ways in which people had sought to draw upon the power of the *ẓara’ib* in the previous century.

The institution of government chiefship in southern Sudan is immensely complex, as explored by Leonardi across multiple works (Leonardi, 2005, 2007, 2013). These new government chiefs were not, as early British administrators perhaps assumed, the resurrection of a ‘traditional tribal leadership’, disrupted by Mahdist authorities; but nor were they a straightforwardly external imposition or colonial import (Johnson, 2016a; Leonardi, 2013). The chiefs emerged from a variety of origins; and as a result, their authority and status *within* their communities varied (Leonardi 2005: 79).

The primary importance of the chiefs was their role in managing relationships with external powers – keeping the state at bay, and deflecting coercion and predation associated with the encroachment of government, while perhaps extracting benefits (ibid). This was a role, Leonardi writes, that “*they might have acquired themselves in the hope of personal advantage, but it was also a function ascribed to them by their people, in recognition of their abilities and in the hope that they would minimise the extractive impact of the foreigners*” (Leonardi, 2005: 79). This, again, shifted dynamics of power between and within groups. Colonial authorities did intervene, deposing unfriendly chiefs and returning friendly chiefs to office (Johnson, 2016a), but chiefship also relied upon a contract

between chiefs and their communities. By the end of the colonial period, government chiefship had become a largely hereditary position; chiefs had gained a degree of coercive power, but this was “*the result of a moral compact made between them and their communities*” (Leonardi, 2013: 79). Thus, in their efforts to govern in ways that made use of limited resources and were rooted in (what were perceived as) local realities, colonial authorities transformed local power structures and shaped complex, somewhat new institutions of chiefship; while South Sudanese individuals and groups responded to and negotiated these new realities in varied ways.

In addition, with indirect rule and ‘devolution’ policy in Sudan came a growing focus on the ‘tribal’ as a unit of administration (Leonardi, 2005). Concretised in the Southern Policy of 1930, colonial leaders sought to create “*self-contained racial or tribal units*” (Leonardi, 2005: 57). With the help of anthropologists, they sought to order and make legible southern Sudan’s social diversity and cultural complexity, delineating boundaries between ‘units’ based on ‘tribal custom’ and linking these groups to particular locations (Leonardi, 2005). These units were governed indirectly by government-appointed chiefs, who, sometimes with the help of armed police, were responsible for taxation and social services (Thomas, 2015). Systems of taxation and labour, organised through these units, “*pushed people into identification with tribes*” (ibid: 95). Colonial administrators “*prioritised what they saw as a ‘modern’ territorial-based identity, ignoring the importance of movement and relationships*”, and in the process hardened boundaries between groups (Pendle, 2023: 29). Colonial authorities also encouraged ethnic identification through education, religion and language (Duany et al., 2021; Tounsel, 2021). Responsibility for education was largely left to missionaries, at least during the first half of Condominium rule; during later decades there was greater government intervention (Sanderson, 1962). Educational policy in the south focused on vernacular education as a barrier to ‘detribalization’ (Johnson, 2016a); education was conducted in vernacular languages, and missionaries produced vernacular dictionaries (Tounsel, 2021), encouraging people to see themselves as part of smaller ethnic communities (ibid). Having delineated South Sudanese communities into ‘tribal units’, colonial educators began to associate different groups with different ‘aptitudes and psychologies’ (Duany et al., 2021). This, in turn, dictated the provision of education, resulting in stark differences in access to education between different parts of the country, further embedding spatial inequalities; for example, in 1954, as the colonial period came to an end, there were 326 schools in Equatoria province, 134 in Bahr-el-Ghazal and just 72 in Upper Nile (ibid).

The efforts of colonial authorities to map and demarcate southern Sudan and southern Sudanese communities into discrete groups, coterminous with fixed, defined pieces of land, went against the realities of movement and mobility that have long characterised this region, and the complex and shifting nature of ethnicity. South Sudanese communities are differentiated and defined through language, ancestry, political histories, economic systems, and modes of social and political organisation (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017; Thomas, 2015). Ethnic communities have never been static, fixed, or neatly demarcated; they are linked by overlapping and shared histories, oral traditions and cultural practices, and have been shaped by migration and intermarriage (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017). They were, and are, “*centres of rapid adaptation and multiple interconnections*” (Thomas, 2015: 51). Ethnic identities have been mobilised and manipulated in varied ways, by colonial authorities seeking cheap governance and by political and military leaders seeking constituencies of support (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017; see also Jok & Hutchinson, 1999). Today, South Sudan’s social complexity continues to be condensed by South Sudanese politicians and ‘harried humanitarians’ into discrete ethnicities, with separate histories and territories (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017).

Importantly, the colonial period also saw a proliferation of new forms of associational and organisational life in South Sudan. This was the case across the African continent, as described by Aina (2013), Obadare and Krawczyk (2022) and others, with new forms of association emerging as people sought ways to cope with the wars, devastation, dislocations and extraction of colonialism, including the enforced reorganisation of societies and economies for colonial production. This led to new forms of association and mutual support, including hometown associations, village development groups, mutual aid groups, credit associations, and burial societies, among others (Aina, 2013; Obadare & Krawczyk, 2022). These became a form of social protection, a way to disperse risk and meet the social needs of their constituents (Obadare & Krawczyk, 2022; Aina, 2013), as well as a form of resistance to colonialism (Fowler & Mati, 2019).

These new forms of association were seen in South Sudan, as elsewhere. As urbanisation accelerated in the 1930s, urban ethnic associations – defined by Thomas (2018: 39) as “*democratically-organized groups for people from one area to share language, traditions, and social support while they navigated the difficult transition to the town*” – were formed in South Sudan’s growing urban centres (Thomas, 2015, 2018). Severino Fuli Boke Tombe Ga’le, for example, describes the existence of a Madi community association in Juba in 1938, connecting “*Madi intellectuals in the*

capital with Madi people in the centre of Madi culture in South Sudan around Nimule” (Thomas, 2015: 154). It had a Central Executive Committee “*subject to the approval of all the Madi working-class throughout the southern districts*”, and which was recognised by “*the bulk of the Madi in the country*” (Ga’le, quoted in Thomas, 2015: 154). Following the second world war, development schemes and educational expansion “*created new spaces for people to organize*” in southern Sudan, with student and workers’ unions emerging (Thomas, 2018), such as the South Sudan Workers Association, formed in 1946 to represent the interests of southern government employees (Johnson, 2016a).

3.4. Post-independence Sudan and the arrival of international NGOs

In 1955, the year before Sudan’s independence, soldiers in Torit, a town in present-day Eastern Equatoria, mutinied. This was followed by two weeks of violent uprisings across towns in then-Equatoria province. The Torit Mutiny is often considered to be the start of the first Sudanese civil war, though this did not escalate into widespread civil conflict until 1963; recent analyses point to the relative stability of the years following the 1955 ‘disturbances’, and the possibility that war could still have been averted (Rolandsen, 2011; Rolandsen & Leonardi, 2014). The ‘disturbances’ of the 1950s were sparked by growing dissatisfaction with the process of decolonisation, in which it was felt that the south was losing out, swapping colonialism under the British for colonialism under northern Sudanese nationalists, combined with frustrations over longstanding, systemic underdevelopment in the south (Rolandsen, 2005; Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017).

The mutiny was suppressed by the new Sudanese government, but dissatisfaction and resistance grew, intensifying after a military coup in Sudan in 1958 (Rolandsen, 2005). The new military government disbanded the Sudanese parliament and placed former southern parliamentarians under political surveillance; South Sudanese leaders were arrested or went into exile (Johnson, 2016a). The events and political decisions of this period following the Torit Mutiny “*made the creation of a South Sudanese armed opposition inevitable*” (Johnson, 2016a: 126), and by 1963 the first civil war had begun in earnest. Numerous groups – including fugitives from the disturbances of the 1950s, southern politicians who went into exile after the coup, striking students, junior government officials and others – coalesced into an armed resistance movement, often grouped under the label of the *Anya-Nya I* (Thomas, 2015). The Sudan African National Union (SANU) was formed in 1962 in exile as the political wing of the armed opposition, and advocated for southern independence (Johnson, 2016a). Like later opposition movements, SANU and the *Anya-Nya* were fragmented, shifting and splitting over the next decade. The movement came

back together at the end of the 1960s under Joseph Lagu's command, as the Southern Sudanese Liberation Movement (SSLM).

The conflict ended in 1972 through a peace deal that came to be known as the Addis Ababa Agreement. The agreement established a Southern Regional Government (SRG) with its own parliament, executive and budgets; the civil service, including district and provincial administrations, were to be 'Southernized', and the economic development of the south was announced as a priority (Rolandsen, 2005; Thomas, 2015; Tvedt, 1994). Provisions on federalism, however, did not go as far as the SSLM and other political parties had hoped (Johnson, 2016a). The agreement was undermined during the 1970s by the Sudanese government's neglect of key provisions; very little of the allocated development budgets for the south were paid out, and the autonomy of the southern government was limited in practice and further restricted over time, gradually losing legitimacy (Rolandsen, 2005). The discovery of oil in Upper Nile and Southern Kordofan at the end of the 1970s did not help matters; major decisions about the location of oil infrastructure (and the development it may bring) were made and announced far from southern Sudan (Thomas, 2015), and a new refinery was built in the north, seen as taking profits from the south (Rolandsen, 2005).²⁴ The global financial crisis of the 1970s and 1980s plunged Sudan into a long running debt crisis that made visions for investment in the country's peripheries unrealisable (Thomas, 2015), and Sudan's foreign debt reached two billion dollars by the end of 1977 (Harir et al., 1994).

The years following the Addis Ababa Agreement also saw an acceleration in southern Sudan's movement away from systems of production and subsistence organised largely around kinship and towards commercial, monetised food markets, with food increasingly becoming a commodity (Thomas, 2019). During the first civil war, people had fled southern Sudan's growing towns, with the population of Juba falling perhaps as low as 5,000, and some other Equatorial towns to a few hundred people or less (Leonardi, 2013). After the 1972 peace deal, the populations of the towns began to increase again; Juba's population, for example, rose to 56,737 by 1973, and to 83,787 in 1983 (Thomas, 2019). This led to growing demand for food in urban markets, and there were sorghum shortages after 1972 (ibid). Grain was imported from northern Sudan, from new commercial sorghum farms in Renk, and from farms in South Sudan's green belt, in parts of Equatoria (ibid). Although most of the residents of South Sudan's expanding

²⁴ The Chevron Oil Company announced in 1980 that oil reserves around Bentiu were extensive; southern politicians demanded a refinery be built in Bentiu, but a decision was taken in 1981 to build the refinery in Kosti, in the north (Harir et al., 1994).

towns relied on the ‘informal economy’ to make a living, there was also a significant increase in waged employment in the towns, almost all of it within the SRG, particularly for those returnees who had received an education in Uganda, or other neighbouring countries (Leonardi, 2013). Expanding employment in the SRG, as well as the national army and police forces, injected large amounts of currency into the regional economy (Hutchinson, 1992). Young men increasingly engaged in seasonal labour migration to northern cities, becoming day labourers in the Khartoum construction industry, for example, returning with money and imported commodities (ibid). Meanwhile, the resources of the towns – including government wages, and income derived from selling fruit, vegetables and alcohol in the new urban centres – were increasingly integrated within the livelihood strategies of those living in surrounding villages, resulting in growing interconnections between urban and rural economies (Leonardi, 2013).

These trends are important in understanding South Sudan’s changing relationship with money and markets, the significance of which is discussed further in chapter five. From the 1930s, British colonial authorities had promoted the commodification of labour and the circulation of money through coercion and taxation, and promoted markets for cattle and grain, though overall the use of money remained very limited (Hutchinson, 1992; Majok, 2022). The use of money expanded in the 1950s and 1960s. Majok (2022), for example, describes how migration for wage labour in the 1950s allowed cattle-poor Dinka families to accumulate money and acquire cattle at cattle auctions, and became slowly integrated into seasonal livelihood strategies. By the 1960s, seasonal migration to northern Sudan for waged labour had become an established livelihood strategy amongst young Dinka men, increasing further in the 1970s, with wages still used primarily to acquire cattle (Majok, 2022). Meanwhile older residents of northern Bahr-el-Ghazal describe an expanding cash frontier from the late 1970s, with money increasingly required for border charges, taxes, and imported drugs and goods (Kindersley & Majok, 2022). Similar themes are explored in Sharon Hutchinson’s well-known work exploring the complex incorporation of money into the social, cultural and economic life of the eastern Nuer from 1930 onwards (Hutchinson, 1992, 1996). By 1980, she argues, money had become part of everyday social life; the mutual convertibility of cattle and money was well accepted amongst the eastern Nuer and there was a growing merchant class (Hutchinson, 1992).

3.4.1. Expanding aid operations following the Addis Ababa Agreement

The period between the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972 and the return to war in 1983 saw international NGOs beginning to operate in southern Sudan in growing numbers. This mirrored

the rapid rise to prominence of NGOs in the global development industry during the same period (see Charnovitz, 1997; Fowler, 1991; Jennings, 2008), as NGOs became a preferred conduit of donor agencies, increasingly favoured over states. At the same time, the Sudanese government began to actively encourage the presence of humanitarian agencies, hosting a conference in 1972 at which it made clear its 'open-door' policy toward agencies seeking to operate in the southern region, a contrast to its previous position (Ladouceur, 1975). Meanwhile, the devastation and neglect of the colonial period, followed by civil war, meant that for foreign NGOs, southern Sudan was "*both the ideal laboratory for development aid and the ultimate challenge*" (Rolandsen, 2005: 26). Jaafar Nimeiri's regime (in power from 1969 to 1985) became the largest recipient of US foreign assistance in sub-Saharan Africa (Moro, 2016). This period foreshadowed the events following the 2005 CPA, when South Sudan again became the focus of large-scale development, reconstruction and repatriation efforts, with large inflows of international aid and an influx of international NGOs. Yet, while the period following the 2005 CPA has been extensively analysed, the period of the Addis Ababa peace from 1972 to 1983 has received comparatively little scholarly attention.

The first, large-scale humanitarian operation in southern Sudan took place in 1972-1973, focused on supporting the return of hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced people from within Sudan and from neighbouring countries. The Sudanese government had been encouraging people to return to the country from the end of the 1960s, even while the war continued, through peace officers working within local governments in the southern regions, though few people responded to their encouragements (Kindersley, 2017). Refugee returns work during this period provided a humanitarian front for forced encampment, relocation and collective violence against the southern population, part of the Sudanese government's counter-insurgency tactics (Kindersley, 2017). After the 1972 peace agreement, the Relief, Repatriation and Rehabilitation Commission (RRRC) was formed, a government agency, into which staff, ideas, tactics and techniques from the civil war were 'recycled' (Kindersley, 2017: 215). The Sudanese government began to encourage external agencies to participate in these relief and rehabilitation efforts, most prominently through the 1972 conference mentioned above. Funding meetings were also held with Oxfam, UNHCR, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) and other NGOs (Kindersley, 2017). UNHCR assumed responsibility for coordinating a UN relief programme in southern Sudan, the aim of which was to "*encourage and facilitate the return of some 700,000 persons to their homes, including 180,000 refugees from neighbouring states*" (UNHCR, 1972). UNHCR launched an international appeal which, by the end of 1972, had raised over 16 million

USD in cash and in-kind contributions, mainly from governments (ibid). The US Government committed 7.8 million USD, and donated food; half of the funds it had donated were used to transport the food to Juba, via Mombasa (Yongo-Bure, 2007).

Kindersley's archival research sheds some light on some of the preconceptions and expectations that shaped these post-war return programmes. Reflecting the assumptions of colonial administrators many decades prior, and later repeated in the repatriation efforts following the 2005 CPA, the repatriation programmes of the 1970s were premised on the assumption that people would return to a rural 'home area' or 'home village', in what administrators understood to be their 'ethnic territory' (Kindersley, 2017). This, Kindersley writes, "*continued a long colonial legacy of anti-urbanisation and population control in the south, as authorities sought to minimise urban centres' creation of a population they saw as dangerously 'detribalised'*" (Kindersley, 2017: 216); it also reflected assumptions of southern populations as rooted in rural, ethnic or tribal home areas (ibid). By 1973, resettlement efforts were winding down. In practice, many people returned to southern Sudan independently; a near-contemporary assessment concluded that for the most part, "*the returnees came back, resettled themselves, [and] rehabilitated themselves*" (Wakoson, quoted in Kindersley, 2017: 222).

Between 1972 and 1983, considerable sums of money were spent on development in southern Sudan, with projects of varying sizes focusing on the improvement of infrastructure and services enacted by numerous governmental and non-governmental agencies (Johnson, 1994; Yongo-Bure, 2007). It was 'widely felt' that the viability of the Addis Ababa Agreement depended, at least in part, on "*rapid economic and social development in the region*" (Ladouceur, 1975: 416), an assumption that presaged the focus on creating a 'peace dividend' in southern Sudan following the 2005 CPA. The European Economic Community (EEC) financed projects directly run by the SRG, including tea production, access roads and coffee cooperatives, and, though the Central Government, supported the construction of Juba Airport (Yongo-Bure, 2007). The US Agency for International Development (USAID) committed significant sums to agricultural infrastructure, road building and primary healthcare, while the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) financed road and bridge building, forestry, and health care, renovated facilities in Juba, Meridi and Kajo-Keji hospitals, and supplied drugs and vaccines (ibid). Other bilateral donors included Abu Dhabi, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Kuwait, Quat, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK (ibid). The effects of these efforts were mixed. There was little coherent planning by the SRG, nor coordination between agencies, and the spatial

distribution of development projects was very uneven (Johnson, 2016a). Projects were clustered in Western and Eastern Equatoria, including road building, agricultural and forestry projects, and health and education sector improvements (Johnson, 2016a; Yongo-Bure, 2007). Large-scale and long-term development projects proposed for Upper Nile and Bahr-el-Ghazal, including the Jonglei Canal and Aweil Rice Growing Scheme, were disrupted by war before coming to fruition and did not provide ‘any real development’ for these regions (Johnson, 2016a).

NGOs engaged in their own fundraising efforts as well as receiving money channelled through governmental donors and UN agencies. In 1972, ICVA “*appealed to the world’s voluntary agencies to help in reconstruction*” in southern Sudan (ICVA, 1977: 15), and worked with the Sudanese Government to coordinate meetings of member agencies. The World Council of Churches (WCC) launched an international fundraising campaign, and together with the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) set up a Churches’ Relief and Rehabilitation Committee in Juba (Kindersley, 2017; Ladouceur, 1975). By the mid-1980s, NGOs were assuming a “*prominent welfare role*”, and NGOs and UN agencies were increasingly funded by donors in preference to bilateral assistance to the Government of Sudan (Duffield, 2000: 79). Prah wrote in 1984 that a ‘great assortment’ of aid agencies could be found in southern Sudan, numbering around 50, with ‘steadily increasing budgets’ (Prah, 1984: 4-5); Yongo-Bure (2007) describes a ‘multitude’ of NGOs operating in southern Sudan during the period of the Addis Ababa peace, while, according to Tvedt, there were 38 foreign aid organisations in Juba alone by 1985 (Tvedt, 1994).

During this period, the zeitgeist of the development industry was changing. There was a burgeoning focus on ‘participation’, shaped by the work of individuals such as Robert Chambers and Paulo Freire, and responding, in part, to growing disillusionment with top-down, state-led approaches to development. Originally envisaged as a counter-hegemonic, radical approach to social transformation, by the 1980s, ‘participation’ had been firmly enfolded into the development mainstream (Brett, 2003; Cornwall, 2007; Cornwall & Brock, 2005; Leal, 2007). The failures of development were “*now to be explained by its top-down, blueprint mechanics, which were to be replaced by more people-friendly, bottom-up approaches*” (Leal, 2007: 540). The trend towards participation was reflected in South Sudan in numerous ways, beginning within the expanding development interventions that followed the 1972 peace agreement and continuing within the relief programmes of later decades. International organisations encouraged the formation of relief committees, intended to facilitate ‘community participation’ in relief and development efforts, including Joint Relief Committees, Community-Based Relief Committees, Inter-Church

Committees and Village Health Committees (African Rights, 1995). The ‘participation’ facilitated through these committees, however, in African Rights’ assessment, remained “*very superficial*”, providing legitimisation for aid agencies’ own programmes (African Rights, 1995: 23), and international organisations tended to overestimate levels of ‘participation’ and ‘sustainability’ (ibid). Techniques of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) – described by Li as the “*arch-technique for knowing “local” communities and rendering them technical*” (Li, 2007: 234) – began to be used in southern Sudan.²⁵ In addition, the new government and NGOs created “*new possibilities for social organization*” (Thomas, 2018: 40), encouraging the formation of agricultural cooperatives, women’s unions, and farmers’ and pastoralists’ unions (African Rights, 1995; Tvedt, 1994), though these organisations often depended on foreign funding to survive (African Rights, 1995; Tvedt, 1994).

Terje Tvedt, who went on to write an influential and much-cited book on NGOs (Tvedt, 1998), wrote a 1994 book chapter that focused on the role of NGOs in southern Sudan during this period (Tvedt, 1994). Tvedt, who had previously worked for UNHCR in Juba, argued that NGOs had become substitutes for the state in southern Sudan, which was itself ‘very weak’; they established their own systems of authority and administration and took on responsibility for most service provision. He explores this primarily through an assessment of the work of Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), which had a large operation in southern Sudan, covering much of what was then Equatoria Province by 1983.

Tvedt’s chapter provides important insights into the expanding scale of NGO activities in parts of southern Sudan during this period. NCA built roads and dispensaries, primary health care centres, and primary and secondary schools, as well as drilling boreholes and organising village-level cooperatives (ibid). It was the biggest employer in the area, with far more reliable salaries than those offered by the regional government, for whom staff shortages were a major problem. In addition, in some areas, NGOs during this period already had significant infrastructural power, and their budgets far outstripped those of the regional state; NCA’s activities on the East Bank, up to 1986, amounted to 75 million USD, almost 20 million USD more than the regional

²⁵ A programme was developed, for example, that involved training community-based animal health workers (CAHWs) as part of efforts to control rinderpest in southern Sudan (Catley & Leyland, 2001). This programme proved very successful, helping to eradicate rinderpest in southern Sudan, though the degree of community participation was, in practice, relatively limited (Catley & Leyland, 2001; Jones et al., 2002). The eradication strategy was “*designed by epidemiologists far from the field, who expect communities to ‘participate’*” (Jones et al., 2002: 8); participation took the form of ‘functional participation’, in which “*community participation is seen by external agencies as a means to achieve project goals*” (Catley & Leyland, 2001: 22).

government invested in the region during the same period. With limited road infrastructure and little in the way of mail, telephone or telegraph systems, NGOs “*monopolised distribution of both information and things due to their well-developed logistic systems, communication networks and superior means of transport*” (ibid: 93). When petrol became scarce in the mid-1980s, the few government cars “*had often to be supplied with fuel begged or bought from the NGOs or the UN*” (ibid: 93).

NCA staff, Tvedt writes, continuously emphasised the need for collaboration with state authorities; they “*warned against the danger of establishing institutions the government could not take over and stressed the necessity of local participation as a way to root the projects locally*” (ibid: 92). Despite this, Tvedt argues that, in its programme areas, NCA became “*not only a state within a state, but the “state”*” (ibid: 94). More broadly, across southern Sudan, NGOs often bypassed local state institutions in their haste to meet targets and deliver basic needs projects, and the impact of their activities “*marginalized the state in many areas and made the local and provincial councils more or less redundant*” (ibid: 99). In 2001, Riehl reiterated Tvedt’s arguments, writing that the ‘systematic involvement’ of INGOs in southern Sudan during this period was part of the reason why “*the first and last attempt at self-determination in the history of Sudan failed*” (Riehl, 2001: 5).

Tvedt’s work contested the prevailing NGO-optimism of the time, evident in academic analyses and development discourses alike. In highlighting the perverse effects of NGOs on state administrations and the contestable nature of NGO discourses of sustainability and participation, it made an important contribution to contemporaneous debates. At the same time, the extent to which NGOs ‘replaced’ the state, as in Tvedt’s assessment, is perhaps overstated. Archival research, for example, highlights a marked increase in the number of letters presented by individuals and communities to the southern government after 1971, including a proliferation of appeals, complaint letters and petitions, as increasingly literate populations – many returning from years spent in exile – made claims on their ‘new’ state (Kindersley, 2017). The archives include many collective petitions and transcriptions of oral complaints. The letter writers demanded, in Kindersley’s words (2017: 220), “*that the Sudanese state live up to its own rhetoric of peace*”, and to “*see what peace actually meant in practice for the rights of citizens and responsibilities of the state*”. The presence of such letters somewhat nuances the idea that NGOs such as NCA were becoming ‘the state’. Tvedt’s chapter, meanwhile, is based on reports produced by government officials and international organisations, and – while fascinating and incisive – tells us little about how Southern Sudanese people themselves perceived the SRG.

Aid operations in southern Sudan during this period were designed, led and mostly staffed by expatriates. It was based on research in southern Sudan during this period that Barbara Harrell-Bond wrote her influential book *Imposing Aid* (1986), in which she sought to show the counterproductive tendencies of aid imposed from outside. The book focuses on relief efforts instituted to respond to the movement of Ugandan refugees into southern Sudan following the overthrow of Idi Amin in 1979 (Harrell-Bond, 1986). The book, drawing on extensive research, critiques the anti-participatory practices and exclusive employment practices that obscured the creativity and skills of Ugandan refugees in southern Sudan and sidelined host government structures. Harrell-Bond highlights the ‘paternalistic’ nature of humanitarian assistance, arguing that, despite mounting evidence of mistakes, unhelpful assumptions prevail: that “*aid must come from outside, and that outsiders must manage it; that host governments lack organizational capacity, and refugees are too helpless to take responsibility for themselves*” (Harrell-Bond, 1986:26). The influx and attitudes of international aid agencies in the 1980s, she argues, undermined the authority of the Sudanese government’s office of the Commissioner for Refugees (COMREF), with agencies regarding themselves as answerable primarily to UNHCR rather than COMREF, contributing in various ways to the ‘institutional destruction’ of the latter (ibid: 67). They also sidelined the activities of what she describes as ‘indigenous voluntary agencies’ that had already been assisting refugees, including SudanAid (now Caritas Sudan) and the SCC (ibid). There were similar patterns in other parts of Sudan; Abdel Ati, for example, describes a ‘steady influx’ of foreign NGOs into the Red Sea Province in northern Sudan in 1984-5, following a declaration of famine; by 1989 there were perhaps 22 registered NGOs in the area, including UN agencies, international NGOs and two Sudanese NGOs (Ati, 1993). The NGOs developed systems of communication which “*largely bypassed official channels*” (ibid: 111), forming a distinct ‘NGO network’. This, Abdel Ati argues, sidelined and contributed to the failure of the local Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), established by the government, as well as draining the regional government of personnel. Another effect of the NGO system, with its superior resources and logistics, was to “*squeeze locally-based voluntary organizations out of the picture*” (ibid: 113).

Harrell-Bond’s critique is supported by Prah (1984), who writes that aid agencies in southern Sudan were staffed by expatriates in all but the most junior positions, with staff and consultants hired through a “*largely closed system of selection and operation, personal contacts and social network*” (Prah, 1984: 7). In one organisation, the head of the agency received a salary of close to 100,000 USD per year; the project anthropologist 35,000 USD and the accountant 23,000 USD; the most senior local staff member received 3,000 USD per year in local currency (ibid: 10). Prah

highlights the expense of paying expatriate salaries, building well-equipped fenced compounds, maintaining vehicles and paying for generators, and argues that, once accounting for these costs, “*precious little is left over for development work which benefits the Southern Sudanese*” (Prah, 1984: 9). Prah’s assessment is that, during the twelve years of the Addis Ababa peace, there had been “*some limited measure of success*,” but that given the funds involved, “*very much more*” could have been achieved (ibid: 6-7); and that “*only a minor proportion of the funds earmarked for the Southern Sudan during the last decade really sank into the ground for the long term good of the people of the Southern Sudan*” (ibid: 14).

The aid industry in South Sudan of course now looks very different to the time Harrell-Bond, Prah and others were writing, as discussed in the introduction. The scale of aid operations is vastly different; most of the staff of international organisations are South Sudanese, and there are hundreds of South Sudanese NGOs playing increasingly prominent roles. At the same time, some of their critiques bear a close resemblance to the frustrations of many interviewees, speaking some four decades later: not least, in the gulf that remains between expatriate and national salaries, the predominance of externally-designed projects and programmes, and the oft-expressed sense that a significant proportion of aid money ostensibly allotted to South Sudan quickly flows out of (or never reaches) the country, channelled instead to foreign companies and expatriate salaries. These tensions between continuity and change are explored in the following sections and chapters.

3.5. The second Sudanese civil war

By the end of the 1970s, the Addis Ababa Agreement and the relative peace it had brought looked increasingly tenuous. During the 1970s, there were a series of mutinies by garrisons within the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF); many of the mutineers fled to Ethiopia, where they were supported by the Derg regime (Johnson, 2016a). They called themselves *Anya-Nya II* and began launching attacks in southern Sudan (ibid). Growing discontent was evident, too, in workers’ and students’ strikes (Harir et al., 1994). In 1983, Sudanese president Nimeiri unilaterally abrogated the Addis Ababa Agreement (Johnson, 2016a). 1983 also saw the Bor mutiny, followed by the mutinies of several further garrisons; many of these soldiers also fled to Ethiopia (Rolandsen, 2005). The Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) was formed in July of that year by an amalgam of the *Anya-Nya II* and the new mutineers (Johnson, 2016a). From the outset, there were competing political visions and struggles for leadership, reflecting tensions between aspirations for southern separation and independence, or for unity within a transformed, secular Sudan (Wassara, 2022). These were longstanding tensions that had

previously led to splits within the SANU and *Anyanya I*, and that went on to shape the trajectory of the SPLM/A (ibid). The SPLM/A, under the leadership of John Garang de Mabior, adopted unity and revolution in Sudan as its stated goal, while other groups, under the label of *Anyanya-Nya II*, continued to advocate for secession of the south. Armed conflict broke out between the groups, and the Khartoum government began to support the *Anyanya II* to fight against the SPLA (Johnson, 2016a; Wassara, 2022).

A 1987 truce brought the SPLA and the *Anyanya-II* back together, while the SPLA's goal of transformation within a unified Sudan allowed it to ally with groups from other parts of the country (Johnson, 2016a). By 1990, the SPLM/A controlled much of southern Sudan, including many major towns. In 1991, however, the SPLM/A split in two, fragmenting further over the subsequent years into a shifting array of militias and coalitions. Old conflicts were re-ignited, and new fissures emerged. The result was a decade of devastating intra-southern fighting, the effects of which are still felt today. Different leaders mobilised regional and ethnically rooted militias, some formed in response to SPLA predation and supported by Khartoum governments (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017). These intra-southern wars contributed to the unravelling of longstanding ethical restraints on warfare, at the same time as polarising and militarising ethnic identities (Hutchinson, 2001; Jok & Hutchinson, 1999). Patterns of intermittent cattle-raiding were transformed into “*no-holds-barred military assaults*” on civilian populations, including the killing of women and children, destruction of property and use of advanced weaponry (Jok & Hutchinson, 1999: 131). The damage wrought by the second Sudanese civil war was far greater than anything experienced during the first (Johnson, 1994). The Sudanese government deliberately targeted rural populations in efforts to reduce support for the SPLA, as well as arming different factions within the south, fuelling escalating patterns of brutality and an increased availability of weapons (Johnson, 1994). Services and infrastructure established in the inter-war period were destroyed, and vast numbers of people were displaced (ibid.). Conflict led to immense suffering, including famines in 1984 in Darfur, and in Bahr-el-Ghazal in 1988 and 1998, and to the deaths of millions of people (Jok, 2017).

The conflict accelerated trends towards monetisation and marketisation, in complex, patchy ways. Armed actors on all sides of the conflict targeted subsistence systems through displacement, looting and land dispossession, undermining household grain production (Thomas, 2019). Widespread displacement and the destruction of homes and farms forced people into paid or indentured labour on the outskirts of towns and on commercial farms, or in

the military (Kindersley & Majok, 2022), and households that lost land and livestock came to depend instead on purchased food (Thomas, 2019). Desperate populations became an “*exploitable labour pool and a lure for humanitarian assistance*” for armed factions on all sides (Kindersley & Majok, 2020: 10). Meanwhile SPLA systems of raids, taxation, and market monopolies helped to enrich a new class of wealthy military leaders (Kindersley & Majok, 2022; Thomas, 2019).

While a small number of aid agencies remained in southern Sudan, the majority had left with the escalation of war. The Sudanese Government prevented aid workers and journalists from accessing famine-affected areas, and there was little coordinated response to conflict-induced hunger and displacement that killed hundreds of thousands of people in the mid-1980s (Maxwell et al., 2014). In 1989, following a devastating famine in Bahr-el-Ghazal, protracted negotiations and significant media attention, OLS was initiated, a large-scale, multi-lateral humanitarian programme based on a tripartite agreement between the UN, the Government of Sudan and the SPLM/A. OLS was administratively separated into northern and southern sectors, with the southern sector coordinated from Nairobi by UNICEF. In the southern sector, OLS agencies coordinated with the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA), the relief wing of the SPLM/A, which had been formed in 1986 at Itang refugee camp in Ethiopia. After 1991, the SRRA’s official headquarters was the Nairobi office, which also doubled as a liaison office for the SPLM/A (Duffield et al., 1995). Most representatives of the SRRA were selected from the military and security wings of the movement (Johnson, 1994). After the SPLA’s 1991 split, international organisations also began to coordinate with and support the Relief Association of South Sudan (RASS), the relief wing of the SPLA-Nasir faction, the main splinter group from the SPLA during this period.

3.5.1. Drivers of capacity building under OLS

During the 1990s, ‘capacity building’ came to occupy a prominent place within OLS, aimed both at the relief wings of the opposition movements (RASS and SRRA) and at newly emerging southern Sudanese NGOs, described in studies and humanitarian documents from the time as ‘Sudanese Indigenous NGOs’, or SINGOs. The commitment to capacity building in southern Sudan was motivated by financial, practical and ideological factors, many of them bearing a striking resemblance to the motivations shaping localisation commitments some two decades later. It is worth spending some time here: OLS set in motion patterns of engagement between international organisations and South Sudanese NGOs that have persisted throughout the intervening years. In addition, analyses of the capacity building efforts of this period undermine

the claimed novelty and innovation of recent ‘localisation’ discourse in South Sudan, pointing to the circularity of aid policy and practice and contributing to the ‘re-historicization’ of aid policy (Lewis, 2009).

Perspectives on and motivations for the capacity building programmes of the 1990s varied. OLS was not a monolith, but rather a consortium of many different agencies, and numerous other international organisations operated in southern Sudan outside the bounds of OLS, some of them with capacity building efforts of their own. Within OLS, the focus on ‘capacity building’ was somewhat contested – for some UN officials, for example, it was viewed as ‘inappropriate’ in an unstable environment, while for others it was seen as a deviation from relief (Efuk, 2001; see also Bradbury et al., 2000). There was also, unsurprisingly, considerable disagreement over what ‘capacity building’ actually meant (Karim et al., 1996). Nonetheless, there does seem to have been relatively widespread rhetorical commitment to capacity building within OLS and amongst international agencies operating in southern Sudan during this period. Programmatic documents and strategic plans from the 1990s are replete with references to capacity building, as well as laments about the perceived *lack* of capacity amongst South Sudanese individuals and institutions to manage relief efforts. A major 1996 evaluation of OLS confirms this, noting that the “*weak capacity of Southern Sudanese counterparts has been widely seen as a hindrance to the delivery of humanitarian services*” (Karim et al., 1996: 5).

The capacity building programmes formed part of a shift from ‘relief’ to ‘development’ within OLS. This shift was driven by various factors, including pressure from the SPLM/A and the Government of Sudan, both of which were demanding a move away from short-term relief and towards longer-term programmes, including capacity building, rehabilitation and development (Efuk, 2001). It was also encouraged by donors, such as the US, which had been “*pouring money into the relief operation at what were considered unsustainable levels*” (Bradbury et al., 2000: 33); ‘development’ was seen as a more sustainable alternative, with the aim of “*getting Sudanese to take on more responsibility*” (ibid: 33). Growing insecurity in South Sudan also played a role, as well as increasing risk aversion amongst international organisations, with international organisations seeking local relief counterparts and subcontractors through which to work. Rolandsen (2005), for example, notes that insecurity had made international organisations unwilling to maintain large numbers of expatriate staff within southern Sudan, and led to a search for local subcontractors. There was also a desire amongst international agencies to circumvent the military

and deal with civil institutions; yet these were largely seen as lacking in southern Sudan, and thus had to be ‘built’ (Bradbury et al., 2000; Karim et al., 1996).

The support and enthusiasm for capacity building seen amongst international agencies in the early 1990s was also intimately connected to shifting trends in the development industry, and particularly to the emergence of the ‘good governance’ agenda, as discussed in the introduction. By the 1990s, the extreme free-market neoliberalism of the 1970s and 1980s had given way to a ‘revisionist neoliberalism’ that conceded a greater role for the state alongside the market, accompanied by a growing concern with institutional reform (Mohan & Stokke, 2000). Rather than the structural adjustment programmes that had hollowed out states, enforced austerity and set many African countries on a ‘low growth path’ (Mkandawire, 2005; Sandberg, 1994), a lack of good governance came to be seen as the main hindrance to economic growth in Africa (Mkandawire, 2007), and good governance, in turn, “*attained the status of a mantra in the development business*” (Mkandawire, 2007: 679). Civil society (itself an idea with a long, varied history) was ‘rediscovered’ by development agencies and policy makers (Lewis, 2009), and civil society strengthening became a central plank in the good governance agenda (Stewart, 1997). Capacity building was a staple of development discourse by the 1990s (Leal, 2007), and with these shifts came a renewed valorisation of the ‘local’. Civil society became a ‘community of concern’, and civil society strengthening became a ‘domain of expertise’; “*the deficit of civil society, its putative absence, distortion or immaturity, had to be rectified*” through training and capacity building (Li, 2011: 103). In southern Sudan, the good governance agenda manifested in efforts both to promote ‘liberalisation’ and reform in the SPLM/A, to strengthen South Sudanese civil society and to encourage the development of South Sudanese NGOs. For USAID, the main benefactor of capacity building projects within OLS throughout the 1990s (Karim et al., 1996; UN OCHA, 1999), capacity building was a way of “*supporting internal reform, promoting good governance and strengthening the civilian part of the SPLM/A*”, and of promoting ‘civil society’ in South Sudan more broadly (Bradbury et al., 2000: 34).

3.5.2. The trajectory of capacity building under OLS

Capacity building had featured in aid programmes in southern Sudan since at least the 1980s, though there was little acknowledgment or institutional memory of this (Duffield et al., 2000). In the early years of OLS, there were smaller, ad hoc capacity building efforts, primarily aimed at

the SRRA.²⁶ Church-based international organisations often worked through local churches and the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC). For example, the Sudan Emergency Operations Consortium (SEOC), which was formed in 1991 and brought together different ecumenical networks, sought to work through local partners from the outset, including the NSCC and local churches, envisaging its own role initially in terms of capacity building (Duffield et al., 1995).

In 1993, USAID provided a grant to UNICEF, the OLS lead in the southern sector, for an ‘Institutional Capacity Building Programme’ (ICBP) (Karim et al., 1996). Under the ICBP, UNICEF facilitated training programmes and workshops for nascent southern Sudanese NGOs, mostly held in Nairobi (with relief officials and other Sudanese aid workers flown in), and provided them with logistical and financial support (African Rights, 1995; Karim et al., 1996). ‘Continual efforts’ were made to “*reinforce humanitarian skills, values and group identity among southern Sudanese people connected with aid work*” (African Rights, 1995: 37). The relief wings of the opposition movements, SRRA and RASS, were provided with financial and logistical support, including secondments of UNICEF advisors to their offices, and cash grants to pay salaries, rents and office costs (Karim et al., 1996). UNICEF encouraged SRRA and RASS to reorganise themselves: “*Their staff were encouraged to identify corporate problems, and were guided towards solutions such as: management boards, clear job descriptions, administrative guidelines and strategic plans ... humanitarian and managerial orthodoxies were well-established in advance, as the dominant items on the agenda*” (de Waal, 2007: 335). In addition, UNICEF began to encourage INGOs operating within OLS to establish partnerships with SINGOs (Karim et al., 1996). These were subcontracting relationships, appearing little different from the model for relationships between international organisations and South Sudanese NGOs that dominates today. Karim et al. described these ‘partnerships’ as follows:

While INGOs help their partner SINGOs to identify sources of funding, this funding is channelled through the INGO, who also supervises the activities of, and receive quarterly and annual reports from, the SINGO partner. SINGOs therefore have no direct access to donors. Some SINGOs also operate as sub-contractors, implementing programmes on behalf of INGOs in parts of South Sudan. (Karim et al., 1996: 219)

²⁶ For example, WFP provided the SRRA with 20,000 USD for support costs in 1989 (Karim et al., 1996), and Oxfam, Save the Children, NPA and others also supported the SRRA from the late 1980s, supporting the SRRA’s office costs and salaries, and sometimes entering into joint projects (Duffield et al., 1995). International organisations sought to work through but also to shape the SRRA; as one evaluation reflects, for example, that these projects “*represented attempts by these organizations to introduce notions of access and accountability to the SRRA*” (ibid: 98).

A commitment to capacity building was also enshrined in the 1995 OLS Ground Rules, negotiated between OLS and the opposition movements (Maxwell et al., 2014). The Ground Rules set out ‘minimum acceptable standards of conduct’ as well as roles and responsibilities for different actors, including OLS agencies, the SPLM and the SRRA (Maxwell et al., 2014). The 1995 Ground Rules stated that *“all humanitarian actions should be tailored to local circumstances and aim to enhance, not supplant, locally available resources and mechanisms. Strengthening local capacity to prevent future crises and emergencies and to promote greater involvement of Sudanese institutions and individuals in all humanitarian actions is an integral part of OLS’s humanitarian mandate”* (SPLM/OLS Agreement on Ground Rules, 1995: 4). By signing up to the Ground Rules, all NGOs and UN agencies operating under OLS committed to strengthening the capacity of local organisations (Bradbury et al., 2000).

After this, capacity building began to feature prominently in UN-coordinated consolidated appeals for Sudan. For example, the 1996 appeal states that *“underlying all OLS programme activities is a commitment to empower the Sudanese to take a lead in their own relief and rehabilitation”* (UN Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA), 1996: 29). The main focus, it states, is on material and technical support, including training, for the relief wings of the opposition groups and for Sudanese NGOs, as well as support for improved ‘sectoral planning, monitoring and reporting’ by these groups. The appeal requests 725,000 USD for capacity building in the northern sector, to be led by UNDP, and 532,000 USD for the southern sector, led by UNICEF (UN DHA, 1996). Subsequent appeals contain similar requests. The 1998, 1999 and 2000 appeals, for example, contain an abundance of references to capacity building for Sudanese counterparts, across diverse sectors, from malnutrition and livelihoods programmes to mine action and demobilisation of child soldiers (UN OCHA, 1998, 1998, 1999). The 1998 and 1999 appeals each additionally request around 750,000 USD for UNICEF to implement standalone ‘institutional capacity building’ projects in the southern sector. The specifics of these appeals provide some insights into the largely technocratic and managerialist nature of the support provided, noting, for example, that this support was to be guided by a ‘participatory organizational assessment’, with possible interventions including *“institutional development support, geared towards senior management with training and management consultancy advice on strategic issues and the future of the organization within the context of their operational environment”* (UN OCHA, 1998: 74-75).

The UN consolidated appeals quite explicitly describe a need to promote South Sudanese NGOs as implementing partners for international organisations. The 1999 appeal, for example, laments

that, due to 50 years of conflict, institutions in southern Sudan *“have collapsed”*, and that as a result, the *“OLS southern sector has found itself operating either in an institutional vacuum or with institutions which have little or no capacity to implement programmes”* (UN OCHA, 1999: 93). It states that UNICEF initiated an institutional capacity building programme for Sudanese humanitarian organisations *“in order to make them better counterparts and implementing partners”* (UN OCHA, 1999: 93). The 1998 appeal, similarly, describes the aim of capacity building as *“strengthening the capacity of local institutions to become better partners in the delivery of humanitarian assistance”* (UN OCHA, 1998: 74). The language of these appeals broadly supports the conclusion of Bradbury et al., who write that that *“under the rubric of supporting civil society, capacity-building has largely been about creating an indigenous capacity for the delivery of international aid for projects designed by international agencies”* (Bradbury et al., 2000: 74).

3.5.3. Self-reliance, ‘localisation’ and austerity in the aid industry

By the end of the 1990s, efforts to promote and build on ‘local capacities’ were being repackaged as part of a new emphasis on sustainability and self-reliance. Protracted aid operations had fostered a persistent belief – still evident today – that South Sudanese people were ‘relief dependent’, a belief at odds with existing evidence, which suggest that food aid has historically contributed relatively little to household food supplies (Thomas, 2019). In 2000, a major ECHO-commissioned assessment of humanitarian assistance in South Sudan stated that there is *“no evidence that people are becoming dependent on food aid in any prolonged or permanent way”*, that relief deliveries had been unreliable and vastly inadequate in relation to needs, making ‘dependency’ unlikely, and that the people are South Sudan *“are in fact surviving this war largely by their own efforts”* (Duffield et al., 2000: 46, 47).

Nonetheless, aid policy in southern Sudan was increasingly shaped by these (misplaced) fears of ‘aid dependency’, and by reductions in donor funding, resulting in austerity within OLS and cuts to programmes. Relief was seen as *“creating disincentives and undermining the functioning of markets rendering people dependent”* (Duffield et al., 2000: 16), and efforts to *“use local organisations and build local capacities”*, in turn, were proffered as a solution to these notions of ‘dependency’ (ibid: 16). In addition, the response to a devastating famine in Bahr-el-Ghazal in 1998 – despite being delayed, inadequate and deeply flawed (Duffield et al., 2000; Harragin, 2001) – had been very expensive, and donors were seeking to cut costs. Sustainability and self-reliance thus became guiding concepts within amongst donors and aid agencies operating in southern Sudan.

The US Government's 'Integrated Strategic Plan for Sudan 2000-2002', for example, contains a resounding focus on 'self-reliance', and is replete with references to good governance and civil society, as well as conveying a clear perception that international assistance in southern Sudan had fostered "*dependency on relief*" (USAID, 2000: 5). It therefore describes a shift in priorities towards 'self-reliance', stating that, in response to the 1998 Bahr-el-Ghazal famine, "*the United States poured some \$200 million in humanitarian assistance into Sudan*", and that this expenditure had "*led the USG to be even more vigorous in shifting its program emphasis to encouraging reliance on local capacities rather than dependency on relief aid*" (USAID, 2000: 3). It criticises the "*lack of capacity of Sudanese individuals and institutions to manage relief, rehabilitation, economic growth, and development*" (USAID, 2000: 5), and states, unironically, that Sudanese people must be assisted to develop "*a greater understanding of and reliance on their own resources*" (ibid: 9), a position not entirely dissimilar to the assertions of colonial administrators that "*chiefs had had to be taught their own customs*" (Leonardi, 2005: 62). The document continues,

"Increasing the emphasis on self-reliance – helping Sudanese to take charge of their own development and meeting local needs with local resources -- will require that more funds be programmed for capacity-building and that relief activities be increasingly managed, coordinated and delivered by Sudanese."
(USAID, 2000: 13).

In 1998, the US-funded Sudan Transitional Assistance for Rehabilitation (STAR) was launched, through which small grants were provided to 'grassroots community groups', enabling them to undertake projects that would "*increase self-reliance while increasing their ability to advocate with civil authorities*" (ibid:5). The consolidated appeal for Sudan for 2000 also contains a pervasive rhetoric around civil society strengthening, sustainability and self-reliance, stating, for example, that "*within OLS areas there is a growing recognition that the local basis for advancing civil society has not been sufficiently cultivated*" (UN OCHA, 1999: 77), but that 'local NGOs' and community-based organisations (CBOs) "*both existing and incipient, constitute a large pool of untapped 'sustainable' potential*" (ibid: 77). The 'problem' with these organisations was still diagnosed as a lack of 'capacity'. The appeal states that 'local organisations' "*lack the resources and training necessary to build the sustainable capacity they need to operate effectively*", with a lack of capacity characterised by "*weaknesses in management and strategic planning, low level networking and inter-organisational support and information-sharing, lack of essential operating assets, low salaries and related human resource deficiencies*" (ibid: 77). The solution proffered is capacity building, facilitated by consultants and INGOs. The appeal also states that "*the UN community has generally not focussed on training, management and other needs of national*

NGOs” (ibid: 77) – an interesting assessment, after six years of considerable funding and (at least rhetorical) commitment to capacity building in southern Sudan. Across these documents, practices of *problematization* and *rendering technical* (Li, 2007) are evident: deficiencies are identified in the ‘capacity’ of southern Sudanese individuals and institutions, linked to a lack of ‘self-reliance’, and this is defined, framed and constructed as a problem. In turn, a bounded, technical solution is proposed, in the form of managerial and organisational support, to be delivered by international agencies. A boundary is thus (re)constructed between those with “*capacity to diagnose deficiencies in others*” (ibid: 7) and to propose and deliver solutions, and those who are “*subject to expert direction*” (ibid: 7).

Ideas of sustainability and self-reliance are, of course, not passive discourses, but rather have very real effects. Karim et al., in the first major review of OLS, were highly critical of the shift from relief to development in the early 1990s, arguing that this was based more on changing fashions in the aid world than on analysis of realities in southern Sudan, which remained a ‘chronic political emergency’ in which “*people’s options for reducing their vulnerability are limited*” (Karim et al., 1996: 305). Perceptions that the situation in Sudan was no longer an ‘acute crisis’, as well as a desire to encourage ‘self-reliance’ and a shift towards ‘development’, had resulted in reductions to rations, as well as a lowering of acceptable standards of nutrition: meaning that levels of malnutrition that would have prompted emergency intervention some years previously were “*now seen as somehow normal*” (Karim et al., 1996: 8). Zoe Marriage, in a 2006 book based on research in southern Sudan in 2001, offered a scathing indictment of discourses of sustainability amongst donors and aid agencies in southern Sudan, which she suggests were a means of legitimating and justifying the reduction and withdrawal of aid, and which stood in stark opposition to the ideas of universal rights and humanitarian principles that humanitarian agencies themselves promoted (Marriage, 2006). The discourse of sustainability, she writes, was “*psychologically assuring for NGO workers... as it renounced responsibility for fulfilling rights or providing impartial assistance, and was something for the Sudanese to achieve, regardless of their economic or political situation*” (Marriage, 2006: 132). In practice, however, the push towards sustainability by NGOs was often “*indistinguishable from withdrawal*” (Marriage, 2006: 131). Nonetheless, discourses of self-reliance and sustainability are remarkably persistent and, indeed, remain integral to the contemporary drive for ‘localisation’.

The main conclusion to draw from this discussion is of the persistence and continuity of the will to localise amongst international interveners in South Sudan, as well as the very long history of

‘capacity building’ efforts, the tendency of international organisations to repeat interventions with limited recognition of what has come before, and the limited novelty of the contemporary ‘localisation’ discourse. Importantly, the will to localise has often been bound up with rhetoric around sustainability, as well as reductions in aid funding, and misplaced – if firmly-held – ideas about aid dependency.

The impact of these interventions on the South Sudanese NGO sector itself, however, could be easily overstated. They led to increasing numbers of South Sudanese NGOs, but only a handful of these survived to the end of the decade, and fewer still past the 2005 CPA. Over the course of OLS, southern Sudanese staff were increasingly employed within international aid agencies, in increasingly senior positions (Duffield et al., 2000). Overall, however, the effect on power dynamics within and between international organisations, unsurprisingly, was very limited. OLS continued to be criticised for limited ‘ownership of and participation in’ relief activities by Sudanese individuals and institutions, including for having hired few local staff members, and having failed to adequately consider the views of ‘Sudanese observers and beneficiaries’ (Maxwell et al., 2014).

3.6. Conclusion: localisation and humanitarianism’s ‘perpetual present’

Lewis (2009) highlights the tendency of development agencies to exist in a ‘perpetual present’, characterised by changing language and buzzwords, and by frequent discussion of approaches and ideas that promise better, newer ways of doing things, with a stronger chance of success. The corollary of this is a tendency to obfuscate and oversimplify the past, downplaying clear historical parallels in efforts to portray novelty and innovation. Attention is then deflected away from historical parallels and patterns in ‘new’ policy ideas. This is driven by varied factors, including professional pressures on staff to downplay the work of those that came before and to demonstrate their own ‘added value’, and the pervasive influence of managerialism on development, associated with a “*relentless emphasis on novelty and change*” (Lewis, 2009: 35).²⁷

Localisation is an excellent example of this. As should be abundantly clear from this history, the will to localise amongst international interveners in South Sudan is not new. Rather, it is a constant thread running through histories of external intervention in the region. This has frequently been bound up with efforts to reduce costs, and to understand, classify and leverage ‘local’ actors and ways of doing things (often with the help of anthropologists). Through their

²⁷ Borton (2016) explores similar tendencies in the international humanitarian industry.

engagement with chiefs, colonial authorities sought to govern southern Sudan more cheaply, in ways that they *perceived* to be consistent with and protective of ‘local’ tradition, and to manage South Sudan’s scale and cultural complexity through knowledge and categorisation of neatly defined ‘local’, racial and tribal units. International interveners during the period of the Addis Ababa peace sought the construction of local production cooperatives and unions, their interventions increasingly suffused with a rhetoric of participation. The capacity building efforts of the 1990s contain particularly strong resonances of more recent localisation discourses, linked to efforts to create reliable, accountable and transparent local ‘partners’ to deliver relief in a context of ongoing insecurity. The will to localise, while often rhetorically linked to efforts to promote South Sudanese ownership, has also often been driven to a significant degree by a desire to cut costs, which remains an important driver of localisation efforts.

It would be a huge oversimplification, however, to present the emergence of South Sudanese NGOs as a straightforward outcome of the actions and efforts of international interveners. Rather, this burgeoning set of organisations has been shaped by complex and varied factors, including the shifting policies of the SPLM/A, processes of urbanisation, monetisation and marketisation, histories of migration and displacement, and the varied choices, efforts and innovations of South Sudanese NGO founders and leaders. It is these recent political and economic changes, and the position of South Sudanese NGOs within them, to which I turn next.

4. Tracing South Sudan's NGO Boom

4.1. Chapter introduction

National NGOs have an increasingly visible presence in South Sudan's towns and cities. Their signboards can be found outside smart buildings nestled alongside the offices of international NGOs in Juba, and outside houses-turned-offices peppered throughout residential areas of the city. Their logos are emblazoned on four-by-four vehicles that traverse the streets of South Sudan's towns. Their staff members participate in, and increasingly lead, national and sub-national humanitarian clusters, the main coordination mechanism of the international humanitarian system. According to South Sudan's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), there are now nearly 1,800 registered local or national NGOs in the country (InterAction, 2023). This is a relatively recent phenomenon: precise numbers are hard to come by (and depend heavily on definitions of an 'NGO'), but sources tend to suggest that there were very few, if any, South Sudanese NGOs prior to 1990, and the overwhelming majority of national NGOs currently active in the country have been founded since 2005.

This chapter charts the history of South Sudan's NGO boom, drawing on the recollections and reflections of interlocutors, as well as on academic and grey literature. As in other parts of the world (Helms, 2014; McMahon, 2017; Vetta, 2018), South Sudan's NGO boom has been shaped and driven, in part, by an influx of foreign funding, and by its long history as an 'experimenting ground' for trends in international humanitarian intervention, including the search for subcontractors amongst international organisations, the fetishization of NGOs in the context of the good governance agenda in the 1990s and 2000s, and the recurrent promotion of 'capacity building', as discussed in the previous chapter. Yet, the history of the South Sudanese NGO sector is also intimately, distinctively and complexly intertwined with the history of South Sudan. As Carroll points out, all NGOs are shaped by their particular social, political and historical environments; they operate "*within a contextual matrix derived from specific locational and historic circumstances that change over time*" (Carroll, 1992: 38, cited in Lewis, 2014: 29). Thus, while the previous chapter pointed to the long, ambivalent history of the will to localise amongst external interveners in South Sudan, this chapter examines the complex, messy array of political and economic forces shaping the 'real world' of South Sudanese NGOs, and driving the proliferation of these organisations over recent decades.

Over the course of the chapter, I seek to draw out three themes that are important to understanding the ‘contextual matrix’ within which South Sudanese NGOs are located. The first is the long history of South Sudanese migration, displacement and return, which is intimately bound up with the history of the South Sudanese NGO sector. Up to four and a half million people were displaced by the second Sudanese civil war (Thomas, 2015), within and beyond South Sudan, and the southern population of northern Sudan was estimated at 1-2 million people by the time of the CPA (Kindersley, 2016). There were large-scale returns to South Sudan following the CPA, with millions of people returning from the north and from neighbouring countries (Kindersley, 2016). Renewed civil war from 2013 led to the displacement, or re-displacement, of around four million people (Bakhit & Kindersley, 2022). These decades of conflict and displacement, as well as migration for study and work, have created displaced, refugee and diaspora communities of South Sudanese across the Horn of Africa, and around the world (Bakhit & Kindersley, 2022), connecting every community across South Sudan into transnational networks (Barnes et al., 2018). Many South Sudanese politicians, NGO workers and others are returnees or dual nationals (Barnes et al., 2018). Sixty years of civil wars have meant, Bakhit and Kindersley write, that many South Sudanese people *“have built multiple homes and meaningful lives across the region and in the wider diaspora”* (Bakhit & Kindersley, 2022: 6).

All this complicates what it means to be a ‘local’ actor in a context in which, for decades, transnational networks and webs of movement and migration have been an integral part of how people survive. These histories of migration, displacement and return have shaped the South Sudanese NGO landscape in numerous ways. Some of South Sudan’s older generation of professional NGOs, dating back to the 1990s and 2000s, were the product of mobilisations of South Sudanese individuals in Kenya or in northern Sudan, while many newer NGOs – particularly those that are most prominent within and visible to the international humanitarian industry – were founded by people who returned to South Sudan after having lived and studied for many years in refugee camps and cities in neighbouring countries, where, often, they had greater access to formal education and exposure to NGOs than those who had remained in southern Sudan. Individual organisations are often connected into dense transnational webs of connection in varied ways, aside from funding relationships with international humanitarian organisations. Some have supporters and board members in neighbouring countries and the wider South Sudanese diaspora, while many NGO founders’ and staff members’ families live in neighbouring countries. South Sudanese NGOs are often shaped by the personal histories of mobility of their founders, creating a source of social and cultural capital, forging new

connections and influencing founders' perspectives and motivations. This complexity is often lost, however, both through the tendency of the international humanitarian industry to classify and categorise organisations into local/international binaries, in a way that elides differences and obscures translocal and transnational entanglements (Paffenholz, 2015; Roepstorff, 2020).

A second theme is of a changing political environment. States invariably influence the emergence and functioning of NGOs, setting requirements for and boundaries around their ability to form, to generate and use resources, and to engage in (overtly) political activities (Bloodgood et al., 2014; Dupuy et al., 2015). NGO regulations and processes of registration influence which types of NGOs survive and prosper (Dupuy et al., 2015), and can intimately shape the character, accountability structures and internal dynamics of an organisation (Alvaré, 2010). In South Sudan, NGOs have been shaped by multiple, shifting and overlapping political and regulatory environments, and have been constrained by the space allowed to them, first, by governments in Khartoum and the SPLM/A, and then by the nascent Government of South Sudan. Regulations governing NGOs, including the 2003 and 2016 NGO Acts, have consistently positioned NGOs as relief organisations, and since 2013, increasingly pervasive political repression, a powerful and far-reaching state security apparatus, and crackdowns on freedom of speech and expression, have strongly propelled NGOs towards service delivery and away from political activism. NGOs are, at the same time, often complexly entangled with South Sudanese politics and political life, in various ways, including through individual histories of boundary crossing (Lewis, 2008a, 2008b) between broadly governmental and non-governmental spheres.

A third theme is of the influence of the international humanitarian industry. South Sudanese NGOs have, over many years, been strongly encouraged and incentivised to mimic the policies and practices of international NGOs (Awany, 2020; Massoud, 2015). Today, an ability to replicate the processes and structures of international NGOs is assessed in rigorous audits and capacity assessments, nurtured through capacity strengthening activities and rewarded with funding. This has driven processes of professionalisation, bureaucratisation and managerialism, trends already widely discussed in the NGO literature (e.g. Atia & Herrold, 2018; Banks et al., 2015; Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Kothari, 2005), which function in various ways to expand the 'cultural hegemony' of western donors (Girei, 2016). These trends are not totalising, and are resisted in various ways, but they are nonetheless pervasive.

4.2. South Sudanese associational life beyond NGOs

South Sudanese associational and organisational life is far vaster and more diverse, with a much longer history, than its recent proliferation of professional NGOs. Kinship systems and ethnic communities have long been a central form of organisation in South Sudan. These are not static, but complex and shifting. Clan and ethnic sections have, for centuries, “*constituted the basis for social security and self-protection, linking individuals into networks of mutual responsibility and welfare, through marriage, reciprocity, and debt – social, moral, and otherwise*” (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017: 2).

Ethnic and regional associations, introduced in the previous chapter, are common in South Sudan today, having provided “*practical and personal support networks*” since at least the 1930s (Kindersley, 2016: 110). They tend to be led by democratically elected committees, forming part of the wealth of vernacular institutions structured around kinship and ethnicity that exist across South Sudan (Thomas, 2018). They typically play a role in social support and mutual aid, amongst and beyond their members. They are often involved in supporting members within the towns and in seeking to raise funds for and foster development in connected rural areas (Thomas, 2015, 2018). They also play a role in political mobilisation, and may be used by politicians in Juba as a means of communication with rural constituencies that they rarely visit in person (Thomas, 2015). Indeed, Thomas notes, the government “*may even encourage this kind of urban association: in a political order overwhelmingly dominated by a single party, particularist groups can play a useful role in articulating local interests – and in fragmenting opposition too*” (ibid: 147). These groups are highly varied; some may be small groups of people raising funds to repair hospitals and schools, while others are highly politically influential (ibid). Some have contributed to ethnic polarisation, while others have played key roles in local peace processes (Thomas, 2018). South Sudanese NGOs, like international organisations, tend to keep these associations at arm’s length, at least officially; though tendrils of connection do exist, primarily through individual NGO staff (of both national and international organisations) who may be members of ethnic and regional associations.

The decades of conflict and displacement that followed Sudan’s independence in 1956 led to new forms of organisation and association. This is examined, for example, in Kindersley’s (2016) PhD thesis, focused on the history of political thought and organisation amongst southern Sudanese residents in Khartoum in the latter half of the twentieth century, including the proliferation of varied South Sudanese associations and organisations. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was significant urban migration within Sudan, including from southern Sudan to Khartoum. These new migrants to Khartoum entered into the organisational life of the city’s

‘peripheral populations’: they formed social organisations, sought self-improvement through cultural clubs, mission schools and self-run evening classes, and participated in rotational credit associations (Kindersley, 2016). Labour unions and sports clubs provided forms of mutual aid and social support, helping with shelter, advice and employment opportunities, and churches also acted as social centres (ibid). There were also many and varied socio-political associations, often combining a mix of politics and mutual support (ibid: 75).

With the deprivations and abuses of Sudan’s second civil war came further large-scale movements of people from Sudan’s peripheries to the capital, and Kindersley writes that 1988 to 1992 was a time of ‘massive organisation’ in new Khartoum neighbourhoods. This built on the history of neighbourhood and community associations in Khartoum, and lent them renewed energy (ibid). Southerners in Khartoum, some working through new organisations such as the Aweil Youth Union, organised waystations, reception teams at bus and train stations, and mutual funds for transport, and collected clothes, food and money to support the new arrivals. Though many such organisations were registered under ethno-regional labels, assistance was “*part of a scale of commonality, under which ‘they helped whoever came from the South to the North’*” (ibid: 108). By the early 1990s, there was a ‘scaling up’ of activity and activism in Khartoum, linked to fears of ‘de-culturation’. A ‘long list’ of organisational, educational and community-building projects started around 1991-94, rooted in civic education and moral community-building. In Kindersley’s interviews, people described “*too many different organisations to be detailed*” being formed in Khartoum in this time (ibid: 147), including “*vernacular language schools, curricula, adult education classes, cultural societies, clan, ethnic, and ethno-regional associations, religious groups, theatre and dance companies, writing groups, musical troupes and neighbourhood gangs*” (ibid: 147), as well as widespread take-up of *sanduk* mutual savings schemes, and further proliferation of ethnic and local associations based on towns, payams and villages of origin (Kindersley, 2016).

Today, there are also many varied youth, women, student and other associations across South Sudan. These often have elected governance bodies, and engage in varied activities; they might support and raise funds for their members in difficulty, fundraise for development initiatives or activities, and engage in lobbying and advocacy on varied issues. They were often active, for example, in helping people to cope with the rapid urbanisation that took place after the CPA, and the large-scale returns to South Sudan. One paper gives the example of the Yei Youth Association, which, at the time, was constructing a youth centre in the town square, and had launched inter-community activities including sports teams and boda-boda associations; it was,

the report suggests, “*the only actor in Yei that has succeeded in bringing together residents of all backgrounds, regardless of ethnic group or displacement status*” (Martin & Sluga, 2011: 25). Many interviewees were currently, or had previously been, members of youth, student or other associations, sometimes describing how holding leadership positions within these associations had helped prepare them for NGO work and other times describing how NGO leadership or employment had enabled them to gain influence within associations. There were also several cases of youth and women’s associations that had registered as NGOs, often in the hope of securing external funding, and that spanned the boundary between NGO and voluntary association, making this distinction more complex than it first appears. Several NGOs worked closely with youth and women associations. Youth and other community association members with NGO salaries can also be an important source of fundraising for these associations, both through their membership fees and through contributions made during specific fundraising drives.

The church is often identified as being South Sudan’s most “*extensive and well-connected ‘civil society’ body*” (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017: 32; see also de Garang et al., 2016). Christianity has had a pervasive influence in South Sudan since at least the period of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, and churches have played a central role in politics and peace-making at local and national levels in South Sudan for decades. Today perhaps seven and a half million of South Sudan’s population of 12+ million people identify as Christian, though statistics are unreliable (O’Byrne, 2021). There are many different denominations: Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian churches have been well-established since the colonial era, and represent South Sudan’s main Christian traditions (Tounsel, 2023), though Pentecostal, Evangelical and Charismatic churches are growing rapidly, at least in Juba (O’Byrne, 2021). The different denominations work together through the influential national body, the South Sudan Council of Churches (SSCC). The SSCC’s history dates back to the 1960s, when Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) was formed by Catholic, Episcopal and Anglican churches, helping to broker the Addis Ababa Agreement of 1972 (de Garang et al., 2016), and playing a role in the subsequent relief and repatriation efforts of the 1970s, as discussed briefly in the last chapter. In 1989, the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC) was formed to operate in SPLM/A-controlled areas, and the South Sudan Council of Churches came into being with South Sudan’s independence in 2011. SSCC-affiliated inter-church committees working at regional and town levels play an important role in local politics (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017). There are many interconnections between NGOs and churches in South Sudan, with many dioceses having established connected relief and

development wings that are registered as NGOs, and seek funding from international agencies; and other NGOs receiving support from churches, including land and equipment.

4.3. The ‘first generation’ of South Sudanese NGOs: transnational connections and political entanglements

Professional, registered national NGOs are a relatively recent phenomenon in southern Sudan, and prior to the 1990s, there were either no, or few, professional South Sudanese NGOs (depending on one’s definition), though there were many other forms of organisation and association. The first wave of expansion of South Sudanese NGOs took place in the 1990s, in the context of the second Sudanese civil war, and a large-scale international humanitarian operation. Several interlocutors worked, or had worked, for NGOs that were founded during this period, and further accounts can be found in contemporaneous literature.

The stories of these older organisations were highly varied; they point to diverse origins and idiosyncratic trajectories that are hard to quickly summarise. They can be organised, very broadly, into two groups: those that worked primarily in SPLM/A-held areas, which were often registered as NGOs in Kenya or Uganda, where they had offices and bank accounts; and those founded and based in Khartoum, or in parts of southern Sudan controlled by the Government of Sudan (GoS), such as the garrison towns of Malakal or Wau. These organisations, if registered, did so with Sudan’s Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC). It is important not to overstate these boundaries, and my aim, certainly, is not to suggest internal homogeneity within these two groups. Nonetheless, I believe it is worth drawing out the differences, firstly because, as Johnson notes (2016), South Sudanese diasporas in different places had different opportunities and experiences during the second Sudanese civil war, and secondly because I have found the experiences of the latter group of NGOs to be less well represented in existing literature.

The proliferation of South Sudanese NGOs in SPLM/A-held areas was influenced both by the changing policies of the SPLM/A, and by the ‘capacity building’ efforts of international organisations, described in the previous chapter. When OLS began in 1989, the SPLM/A prohibited both the hiring of South Sudanese staff outside its own relief wing, and the formation of ‘indigenous’ NGOs in areas under its control (Karim et al., 1996; Rolandsen, 2005). This changed in the early 1990s, in the context of a wider series of reforms intended to ‘liberalise’ the SPLM/A and to create a civil administration in areas it controlled (Rolandsen, 2005). From 1993, the SPLM/A leadership began to allow the formation of what literature from the time refers to

as ‘Sudanese Indigenous NGOs’, or SINGOs, with Garang giving approval for the formation of the first such NGO in March of that year (De Waal, 1997; Rolandsen, 2005). The 1991 split in the SPLM/A had led to growing competition between factions to court international support (African Rights, 1995), and the ‘opening up’ for local NGOs, Rolandsen writes, “*was partly motivated by the prospect of attracting more development aid to SPLM/A controlled areas and improving the Movement’s reputation*” (Rolandsen, 2005: 78). It was also a way of creating opportunities for “*dissatisfied SPLM/A officers and educated Southerners*” (Rolandsen, 2005: 78) who might otherwise have posed a challenge within, or defected from, the SPLM/A. The opening up to local NGOs from 1993, Rolandsen concludes, was “*spurred mainly by the need for foreign NGOs to find local partners*” (ibid: 169) but would not have happened had the SPLM/A not allowed it.

Amongst the first ‘SINGOs’ to be established was the Cush Relief and Rehabilitation Society (CRRS), founded in Nairobi in 1993 and working mostly in Bahr-el-Ghazal (Duffield et al., 1995). The experience of CRRS is indicative of wider themes in this early history of South Sudanese NGOs, including the political or military seniority of some of their founders, their prior experience in the aid industry, and their close – if complex – relationships with the SPLM/A leadership. Two of its founders had worked with the Sudan Council of Churches before joining the SPLM, and another two had held office in the SRRA (African Rights, 1995). The first director, Dr Achol Marial Deng (now an MP), was a student politician in Juba, who became a commander in the SPLA and then medical coordinator of the SRRA (de Waal, 1997). He had briefly belonged to the break-away SPLA-Nasir faction, before returning to the SPLA-Mainstream (Kuyok, 2015). He approached John Garang with the idea for the CRRS, stating,

I was putting the SPLA on test. Was it a movement subject to reforms, or just the old order? This was a test case. Thank God that Dr John saw the point and encouraged the idea... Reading between the lines, it was another way of accommodating me as a political animal (Deng, quoted in De Waal, 1997: 326-327).

Dr Deng stated, of founding the organisation, that the aim was to “*try academically to convince the international community as to how resources could be channelled to the needy people behind the SPLA and SSLA lines*”, as well as being another means of “*contributing to liberation*” (Deng, quoted in African Rights, 1995: 36). In 1993-4, CRRS received more than \$200,000 from seven donors, as well as equipment and project supplies, but most of its funding was later suspended following poor results in an audit (de Waal, 1997).

An example of another, quite different organisation, founded the following year in the same city, is found in Hilhorst and Van Leeuwen's (2005) account of the Sudanese Women's Voice for Peace (SWVP). SWVP was established in 1994 in Nairobi with the aim of uniting southern Sudanese women of different groups and religions. Its initial membership was comprised primarily of the wives of South Sudanese political leaders, and women who were already active in organisations and peace-building initiatives. They had varied ethnic origins, and all lived in Nairobi. They organised public events and received funding to visit southern Sudan. A delegation went to the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, which raised their visibility, and they began receiving international support including funding. Thus, rapidly after their formation, the organisation *"became discursively and organisationally intertwined with the international community working for Sudan"* (ibid: 548). SWVP also began organising and training women's groups within southern Sudan, becoming a network of ten organisations and developing a vision of forming a country-wide women's movement (van Leeuwen, 2004). SWVP took on a donor-funded programme, working alongside a Dutch peace organisation, and to do this, they had to register as an NGO. After registering as an NGO, internal divisions and organisational problems proliferated, fostered by the transformation of the SWVP from a voluntary organisation to a registered and increasingly hierarchical NGO, in which some members received salaries; this also strained relationships with the SWVP chapters within southern Sudan (Hilhorst & van Leeuwen, 2005; van Leeuwen, 2004). There were various challenges, with problems coming partly from within SWVP and partly *"induced by the donor agency that projected its ambitions and views onto a local organisation"* (Hilhorst and van Leeuwen, 2005: 560), and, over time, the reputation of the SWVP deteriorated. The example of SWVP points to the ambivalent influence of donor funding and to the fraught process of becoming an NGO, as well as highlighting, again, political entanglements and transnational interconnections.

CRRS and SWVP are examples of a rapidly growing group of South Sudanese NGOs. According to Karim et al. (1996), in 1993 there were two 'SINGOs'; by 1994, there were 25, and by mid-1995 there were 30; though many of these were formed 'in expectation' of UNICEF support, and existed *"only on paper"* (Karim et al., 1996: 219, 221). A small but growing number appear to have gained acceptance as intermediary aid organisations within OLS; seven 'SINGOs' are listed as operating in the OLS southern sector in the 1998 consolidated appeal, and eight in the appeal for 1999 (UN OCHA, 1998, 1998). The New Sudanese Indigenous Network (NESI), an umbrella body for Sudanese NGOs launched in 2000, had nine NGO members in 2001 (NESI,

2001). According to Hilhorst and Van Leeuwen (2005), citing the records of the Sudan Ecumenical Forum, by 2001 there were around 65 Sudanese organisations, mostly ‘in the format of an NGO. This period also saw slowly growing numbers of southern Sudanese staff members within international organisations, though these remained small compared to the present day, with around 200 southern Sudanese people working for international aid agencies by 1996 (Efuk, 2001).

Many of these new NGOs were registered in Kenya, with offices in Nairobi and Lokichoggio, a town in northern Kenya and a major hub for aid operations in the OLS ‘southern sector’. One of South Sudan’s oldest, still-operating NGOs, for example, was founded in the early 1990s in an SPLM/A-controlled part of western Bahr-el-Ghazal, by a group of ‘youth or intellectuals’ from different parts of the state. It was registered as an NGO in Kenya the following year, because, as the current director explained, there was “*no government structure*” with whom to register, and “*for you to get funding from the donor, you need a certificate of registration*”.²⁸ They also needed a bank account which, again, required an office in Kenya. The organisation therefore established small offices in Nairobi and Lokichoggio, though these were “*just for registration*” and its headquarters remained within South Sudan. It began receiving funding from UN agencies and international NGOs, working primarily in humanitarian relief and growing relatively quickly. The founder later became an MP and is no longer involved, but the organisation continued under a new director. Their head office remains in western Bahr-el-Ghazal, and they maintain an office and bank account in Nairobi.

Another interviewee, the founder of an organisation established in 2002, explained, “*during the war, everybody was based in Loki, if you are operating in South Sudan, you need to be based in Loki... And since Loki is the land, for you to have legal operation, you must have papers that prove that you are registered with the government.*” The organisation was registered as an NGO in both Kenya and Uganda, while working in several different locations in Unity State and Western Bahr-el-Ghazal, where they were involved in projects related to education and the provision of safe water. The organisation relocated to South Sudan in 2005, but has maintained its registration status in Kenya and Uganda. As a result, he says, “*we are a national NGO, but we are also regional. Because we are registered in Kenya, we are registered in Uganda.*”²⁹

²⁸ Interview, 27 June 2019

²⁹ Interview, 21 March 2021

During this period, South Sudanese NGOs tended to focus primarily on relief activities, sometimes with peacebuilding as a secondary objective (Hilhorst & van Leeuwen, 2005). This was partly because these were the activities donors were willing to fund, as well as being “*the only activities these organisations could safely engage in without threatening the SPLM/A’s monopoly on power*” (Rolandsen, 2005: 130). Some, however, had more explicitly political aspirations and activities, in ways that aligned with the aims of the SPLM/A. One interviewee, for example, worked for an NGO that was established in the late 1990s, in an SPLM/A-held town in the southernmost part of the country. Amongst the founders were individuals who are now senior SPLM politicians. With support from an international donor, the organisation grew quickly, soon working across three states. It engaged in various activities related to civic education and human rights, including conducting training sessions for local chiefs and military actors. He reflected that the organisation “*was one of the oldest institutions that we have. And it was very progressive, and it had the goodwill of the SPLM. Because it was strengthening communities, and local structures, in the areas where they are in control.*” He continued,

The foundation [of the organisation] was premised on the fact that, okay, we are fighting a war, and we have civilians under our control, and we want to open up to humanitarian grounds, and we want to establish local structures. So that fitted well with the dream of the SPLM, which was trying to strengthen the civil administration for new Sudan, which they were calling it in the camps.

He himself began working for the organisation in South Sudan in the early 2000s, as the peace process was underway in Kenya. He reflected on his experience with a degree of enthusiasm, recounting:

We were a team of progressive young people who were coming back from refuge, who had our education in Uganda, and then having the chance now to come back to your own country, and try to begin rebuilding it. And picking it from scratch where there were no major organisations that were operating behind SPLA frontlines. ... And so, life was basically completely different, at that point... I was still a young person, who was coming out of school and with a lot of excitement to experience more.³⁰

This example links to another point: that, since at least the 1990s, international organisations and South Sudanese NGOs have offered an alternative to employment in the government or army for a small number of educated, English-speaking South Sudanese individuals. Øystein

³⁰ Interview, 18 November 2021

Rolandsen, for example, writes that in the 1990s, the emergence of South Sudanese NGOs “provided a politically acceptable alternative for educated Southerners to contribute directly to the improvement of the lives of the civil population outside the Movement’s structures” (Rolandsen, 2005: 130). Interviewees who had been engaged as aid workers during the period of OLS reflected this. Several had fought with the SPLA and worked with the relief wings of the armed movements, before joining international or South Sudanese organisations. One interviewee, for example, was a young man in 1983 when the civil war broke out. He fought with the SPLA for several years, before being seconded to the RRC, the relief wing of the movement (an experience he shared with several other interviewees). This was his first foray into the humanitarian field; he describes it as going from “active service, armed service, to relief service”. This, he says, right at the beginning of our interview, was “where I’ve seen some light.” He explained,

In the SPLA it was just about war, problems, with the Sudan, slogan, liberation. Where is domination, marginalisations, people wanted freedom. But after I went to humanitarian field, it was another field to, to revisit myself and check whether I knew, I wanted to learn because it's like, okay, maybe I wanted to learn because I'm dealing with learned people, within the Operation Lifeline Sudan and the NGOs who are of that time. I was like a counterpart. And that worked good for me, because I was able to open books again and revise my memory, and equip myself once again. That also attracted me to NGO work.

Eager to further his education, he decided “the best field would be to work for an NGO”.³¹ A staff member from an international organisation, already known to him through his role as a relief counterpart, offered him a job; he worked for the organisation for several years, before taking up a government role after the 2005 CPA.

Another strand of South Sudanese NGO histories is of organisations formed by groups of South Sudanese individuals living in Khartoum, or in GoS-held parts of southern Sudan.³² One, for example, was formed in the early 1990s as a membership organisation for people from Western Equatoria living in Khartoum, later expanding to include members from any part of Sudan. The founders were described by the current director (and member of the founding group) as student activists and leaders, who were active in the church and had been influenced by liberation theology. The organisation operated for the first ten years without registration or external funding, choosing instead to depend “more on our community”, because they wanted “to nurture the

³¹ Interview, 27 October 2021

³² Interviews, 19 June 2019, 16 March 2020, 1 November 2021, 10 December 2021

organisation, and to test whether people have capacity to support the organisation, [whether] they believe it is doing the right thing".³³ Members would donate food, and they would hold community meetings. Those running the organisation were volunteers, and also worked as teachers to sustain themselves. It was registered as a national NGO in the early 2000s, ten years after it was founded, with the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs in Khartoum. It had offices in both Khartoum and Juba, before moving its main base to the south after the CPA.

Other organisations were established in GoS-held garrison towns in the south. NGOs in northern Sudan, and in GoS-held parts of the south, were required to register with Sudan's HAC, which, following the 1989 coup in Sudan, had been "*transformed into a security organ*" (Abdel Ati, 2006: 69), with heavy restrictions placed on NGOs. NGOs were prohibited from engaging in political issues, including human and civil rights, and restricted to service delivery (ibid). Interviewees from organisations founded during this period recounted the challenges they faced in securing registration.³⁴ One, for example, was founded in the early 2000s in a GoS-controlled town, by a group of young people from different parts of one southern Sudanese state. Their aim was to unite young people from across their state. This led them, almost immediately, to challenges with the HAC. As the current director (who was a founding member) recalled,

The registration was also difficult, because the Sudanese government, that time we were still one, they thought maybe youth are trying to reunite to do what? [Laughs]... So when we try to register, they refuse to register this kind of organization, so we had to struggle and use different avenues, explaining that this organization is not a political kind of organization. Rather, is a purely youth organization who are trying to come together and work for peace and development in their area, you see?

It took two years and a change in leadership at the state-level HAC to secure their registration. They had to demonstrate to the HAC that,

*We have our assembly, we have our constitutions, and we have our members. When you check our members, they are not politicians. So that that's what happened, from time to time, we approach them, until in 2005, that's where we were accepted to be registered as one of indigenous national organization in South Sudan.*³⁵

³³ Interview, 29 December 2021

³⁴ Interviews, 2 September 2019, 25 October 2021

³⁵ Interview, 25 October 2021

In sum, by the time of the CPA, there were growing numbers of South Sudanese NGOs, with relatively varied origins and histories, translocal and transnational connections and shifting and varied political entanglements. Their histories challenge straightforward assumptions of NGO de-politicisation, as well as helping to complicate the ‘local’ in localisation. They also counter assertions that there were “*effectively no southern Sudanese NGOs*” (Ali et al., 2018: 5) during the time of OLS, pointing, rather, to the longevity of some South Sudanese NGOs, which have two- or three-decades’ experience of working within or adjacent to the international humanitarian industry.

4.4. South Sudan after the CPA

In 2005, the CPA was signed by the Government of Sudan and the SPLM/A. This was the culmination of several years of negotiations in Kenya. It incorporated agreements negotiated over the preceding years, including the 2002 Machakos Protocol, which provided for a six-year interim period of self-government in the south, and established the right to self-determination for the people of South Sudan, with a referendum on South Sudan’s secession to be held at the end of the interim period. A 2004 agreement on power sharing established that the south would be governed by an independent Government of South Sudan, with its own legislative assembly, executive, and judiciary, with the SPLM to make up 70% of the government; and an agreement on wealth sharing of the same year granted 2% of oil revenue to oil producing states, with 50% of the remaining revenue to be allocated to the Government of South Sudan (*The Comprehensive Peace Agreement*, 2005).

The CPA brought a period of relative stability to South Sudan, creating a tentative peace between northern and southern Sudan that has largely held. It did little, however, to address intra-southern tensions that had led to some of the worst abuses of the war, and violence continued in several parts of the country. Violence within South Sudan during the interim period between the CPA in 2005 and independence in 2011 was often attributed (then, as now) to issues of ‘tribalism’, as well as to the influence of the Khartoum government (Schomerus & Allen, 2010); thus missing the complex, shifting drivers of growing violence in different parts of the country, including tensions around state-building, boundary demarcation, and land governance, amongst other things (ibid). Meanwhile, in conferring power on the SPLA, the CPA had “*effectively removed power from the South Sudanese citizenry to determine the legitimacy of the powers that would govern them*” (Pendle, 2018: 4), and issues of accountability for past abuses were largely swept under the rug (Logo, 2021). There now exists an abundance of analyses examining the fraught

legacy of the CPA which, like South Sudan's subsequent 2015 and 2018 peace agreements, brought a brief period of calm, while entrenching elite interests and sowing the seeds of further conflict (see, *inter alia*, Craze & Marko, 2022; D'Agoot, 2018; Srinivasan, 2021; Young, 2019). South Sudan's post-independence wars have clearly demonstrated that the CPA and, latterly, South Sudan's independence, were not the panacea many had hoped.

From 2005, through independence in 2011 and up to the outbreak of conflict in December 2013, large amounts of international funding flowed into southern Sudan. Between 2005 and 2009, international donors channelled an estimated 4.2 billion US dollars to South Sudan, with an additional four billion USD spent on contributions to the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) (Bennett et al., 2010). These funds were primarily administered by and channelled to international organisations, including UN agencies, international NGOs and private companies (*ibid*). While before 2005, almost all aid to southern Sudan was broadly 'humanitarian', after the CPA this switched towards a state-building agenda (Sørbø et al., 2016); donor spending focused on delivering a 'peace dividend' in South Sudan, heavily shaped by the assumption that development would bring peace, and that *lack* of development was a cause of conflict (Bennett et al., 2010).

4.4.1. South Sudanese NGOs after 2005

From 2003, with preparations for peace already underway, the number of South Sudanese NGOs began to increase (Moore, 2009; Wani, 2012). There were new regulations governing NGOs. The SPLM's 2003 NGO Act (which remained in place until 2016) defined an NGO as an organisation with a written constitution, formed "*for the promotion of social welfare and charity through mobilization of private resources*", with the objectives of NGOs framed very clearly around humanitarian relief and rehabilitation (Secretariat of Legal Affairs and Constitutional Development, 2003: 1). The law notably omits organisations with more political or advocacy-oriented objectives (a trend continued in later legislation). All NGOs were required to register with the Secretariat for Legal Affairs and Constitutional Development (which became the Ministry of Justice), and registration could be refused if an NGO's activities were deemed incompatible with 'humanitarian principles' (Secretariat of Legal Affairs and Constitutional Development, 2003). Nonetheless, varied civil society organisations did participate in the peace process that led to the CPA (Thomas, 2018) and in political processes related to the emergence of the nascent southern state; in February 2005, for example, 57 South Sudanese civil society

organisations participated in a consultation with the SPLM on the new constitution (Africa Peace Forum et al., 2005).

With the formation of the new South Sudanese government in 2005-6, many former South Sudanese NGO directors and employees moved into roles in the new government (Brandstetter et al., 2010; Moore, 2009). This deprived many organisations of their leadership (Virk & Nganje, 2016) and led to complaints that civil society was “*losing its teeth*” (Thomas, 2018: 41). As one interviewee commented,

*A number of [NGOs] also collapsed... you find that when the good leaders, the founders, with the establishment of the government, most of them moved to government. And, you know, the civil society sector, NGO sector was not that lucrative between 2005 and 2011, because government was a good employer, all the money was there, so who wants to be in civil society anyway? And that's one contributing factor that made some of the organisations to go down.*³⁶

Some Nairobi-based South Sudanese NGOs struggled to make the shift to Juba, limited by the significant costs involved and disruption to family life, as well as growing competition for funding (Moore, 2009). Yet, others continued, sometimes under new leadership, and many new NGOs were founded in the years following the CPA, influenced by the growing numbers of returnees to South Sudan, by opportunities for funding related to the implementation of the CPA, and the relative expansion of civic space, amongst other things (de Garang et al., 2016; Moore, 2009; Wani, 2012). Wani (2012), for example, describes many new organisations being formed in 2005, 2006 and 2007, due, in part, to opportunities for local organisations as part of well-funded programmes related to CPA dissemination, awareness and implementation. These activities “*encouraged South Sudanese mostly in neighbouring countries like Kenya and Uganda to form local organizations and tap into the opportunities that CPA signing presented*” (Wani, 2012: 8). Moore describes, in 2007/2008, the emergence of “*many new local organizations headed by dynamic young people, some coming from their communities and others returning from the diaspora*” (Moore, 2009: 4). In addition, in South Sudanese civil society more broadly, this was a period of significant change; there were new universities, media organisations, professional and trade unions and others, and new laws governing their existence (Thomas, 2018). South Sudanese NGOs and newly-formed civil society networks played an important role in mobilisation around the 2010 elections and 2011

³⁶ Interview, 20 November 2021

independence referendum, and more organisations emerged during this period (de Garang et al., 2016; Moro, 2015).

The post-2005 period was generally recalled favourably in interviews, with interlocutors reflecting, for example, that “*the CPA gave room for the local organisations to at least function within the country... people now felt like yes, they have that peace that they were longing for.*”³⁷ This was often presented as a period of expansion amongst NGOs, fuelled, in part, by the relative expansion of civic space, by the initiation of civil society strengthening or capacity building programmes by international organisations, by the availability of development-oriented funding, and by returns to South Sudan. Several interviewees had been involved with South Sudanese NGOs or CBOs during this time: some directly, as founders, volunteers, members and staff members, and others indirectly, as employees of international organisations engaged in civil society strengthening programmes. One interlocutor, for example, had worked for many years for an international peacebuilding organisation in South Sudan, beginning in the early 2000s. His work involved funding and supporting South Sudanese NGOs and CBOs. He reflected,

*This question of national NGOs start emerging during the CPA, 2005. I know because I was in [international NGO], and we were funding national NGOs. This is where people like [names of prominent national NGO] is starting to develop their papers. Even without registration, official, legal registration, but we partner with them.*³⁸

Another interviewee, a former international NGO employee and the founding director of a national NGO, established in the early 2000s, recalled,

*2006, 2007, 2008, OFDA,³⁹ American government... come up with idea of how they should support community-based organisations, so they do mobilisation for peace. So, they came up with funding for health, and then for peace... that time, so many national organisations came up.*⁴⁰

A third interviewee, the former director of a prominent South Sudanese NGO which was very active in the years following the CPA, including in supporting and mentoring other NGOs and CBOs, similarly recalled a growing and relatively varied NGO landscape:

³⁷ Interview, 2 August 2019

³⁸ Interview, 27 October 2021

³⁹ The Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance

⁴⁰ Interview, 8 August 2019

It was development funding that was coming up, and that coincided with the return of the refugees from Uganda and Kenya. So that was the period of the return, and the time when agencies and donors were focusing on development of critical infrastructure to facilitate return and reintegration of people. And of course, there was a huge excitement that okay, peace is finally here. And okay, now, South Sudan, the region needs to be developed... it was really a very, very good environment... and I can assure you, so many national organisations came up. And then now you would be able to see the split between those which were focusing on development and humanitarian initiatives, and those that were working on governance and political transformation processes... you could visibly see that these ones are doing this, and these ones are doing that.⁴¹

This picture of a burgeoning NGO landscape is supported by a 2012 study by Hafeez Wani (2012). Wani reviewed databases of South Sudanese NGOs and CBOs collated by seven organisations, yielding a list of 731 local organisations, of which 142 responded to an online survey or telephone interview. Of those that responded, most had been formed between 2003 and 2009, with a peak of NGO formation in 2005. 23% were registered with the Ministry of Justice, 48% with the South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), and the remainder with a range of other bodies, reflecting the considerable ambiguity around NGO registration during this period.⁴² A mapping assessment conducted by UN Habitat in 2008-2009 across all ten states surveyed 370 local organisations (Moore, 2009), as well as identifying another 150 that the team did not have time to canvas. According to Martin and Mosel, writing in 2011, the South Sudan business registry showed almost 700 NGOs had been established since 2006, and over 8000 businesses (Martin & Mosel, 2011). Both Wani and Moore found the greatest number of NGOs to be in Central Equatoria (the state in which Juba is located), followed by Jonglei and Unity states (Moore, 2009; Wani, 2012).

These organisations engaged in a relatively broad set of activities. Interviewees involved in South Sudanese NGOs during this period described building schools, training teachers, drilling and rehabilitating boreholes and organising peace conferences, as well as engaging in varied forms of

⁴¹ Interview, 18 November 2021 (b). This reflection was particularly in contrast to the situation after 2013, when many organisations either shifted to focus on broadly ‘humanitarian’ work, or became dormant, as discussed below.

⁴² At the national level, responsibility for registering NGOs passed back and forth between the Ministry of Legal Affairs and Constitutional Development (MoLACD), the South Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) and the Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare and Religious Affairs (MoGSWRA) (Moore, 2009; Wani, 2012), becoming something of a ‘political football’ (Brandstetter et al., 2010). At the state level NGOs could register with, or seek a Memorandum of Understanding from, a range of government bodies (Moore, 2009; Wani, 2012).

civic education and legal aid and advocacy. Amongst the NGOs surveyed by Wani, the most common sectors of work were education, peacebuilding, water, sanitation and hygiene, and income generation, and organisations often moved between sectors based on availability of funds (Wani, 2012). Moore's survey, too, found school construction, teacher and PTA training, WASH, and adult education, to be the most common areas of work for South Sudanese NGOs, followed by health clinic rehabilitation, seed production and farmer training, and income generating activities (Moore, 2009). Government restrictions, combined with donor priorities, continued to drive NGOs towards humanitarian relief and service delivery (Brandstetter et al., 2010; Wani, 2012); governance initiatives designed with the aim of 'holding the government to account' were driven by a very small group of organisations, and faced significant objections from the national government (Wani, 2009).

INGO subcontracts were the primary source of funds for programmes, as well as internal contributions for day-to-day organisational management (Wani, 2012). As is the case today, Wani notes that it was common practice for organisational founders or 'well-wishers' to make personal contributions towards the functioning of the organisation, often drawing on income from full-time roles with the government, international NGOs or in the private sector, an indication of the fact that establishing and growing an NGO often depends on existing access to financial capital obtained through work in other organisations. Moore (2009: 11) also concluded that *"privately donated or personal funds are often what keep organizations afloat"*, and that available funding from INGOs, *"tends to be prescriptive and tied to certain sectors"* (Moore, 2009: iii), leading organisations to often change their areas of focus, and to move into new areas of which they had limited experience. This is one amongst many ways in which South Sudanese NGOs were shaped by the international humanitarian industry, as discussed in the next section.

4.4.2. Shaping South Sudanese NGOs

As NGOs proliferated in the years following the CPA, they also professionalised, shaped, to a significant extent, by the policies, practices and programmes of the many international organisations and donor agencies that established a presence in South Sudan in this period. This took place both explicitly – through training and mentorship provided by international NGOs to their South Sudanese partners, through capacity assessments, and through larger-scale, multi-organisation 'capacity building' and 'civil society strengthening' initiatives – and implicitly, through the movement of staff between international and national NGOs, and through

requirements and distribution of funding (which primarily supported, and encouraged, urban, registered, professional NGOs).

In the wake of the CPA, international organisations initiated an array of ‘capacity building’ initiatives for South Sudanese NGOs and CBOs, including several large civil society strengthening programmes, often funded by donors as part of their ambition to promote democracy in the nascent state. This reflects trends seen in many other parts of the world during the 1990s and 2000s, in which international donors sought to *“build national civil society sectors made up of recognisable and formalised organisations”* as part of wider good governance agendas (Mercer & Green, 2013: 108; see also, *inter alia*, Doornbos, 2001; Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Stewart, 1997). Of the estimated 4.2 billion USD channelled to South Sudan by international donors between 2005 and 2009, around 16% (665.5 million) was spent on ‘civil society and governance’. This is a large category, much of which is accounted for by ‘civilian peacebuilding’ (134.2 million), UN peacebuilding (80.7 million), and economic and development policy and planning (71.8 million) (Bennett et al., 2010). Support for the new South Sudanese government was generally prioritised over support for civil society (Bennett et al., 2010; Fenton et al., 2012), but an estimated 52 million USD was spent on ‘strengthening civil society’ (Bennett et al., 2010).

For USAID, the largest donor to South Sudan by a considerable margin, promoting democratic governance was central to their strategy for engagement in South Sudan after 2005, and ‘civic participation’ was viewed as an integral component of this (see Brandstetter et al., 2010; USAID Regional Inspector General, 2012). They funded several programmes intended to promote civil society and civic participation. One of these was ‘Localizing Institutional Capacity in Sudan’ (LINCS), the contract for which was awarded to Mercy Corps in 2005. Amongst its aims was *“to develop and improve the organizational ability and capacity of nascent CSOs to promote and support active social, economic, and political participation”* (Brandstetter et al., 2010: 23). An individual who had been involved with the programme at the time commented that *“the idea was really to, to build a third arm of the society, after private sector, public, now the civil society... to have at least the third arm of society to be there, as watchdog for both the public and also the private sector”*.⁴³ LINCS’ activities included ‘improvement and certification’ of 114 CSOs,⁴⁴ construction of 13 civil society resource centres, and construction of a network of community radio stations (USAID Regional Inspector General, 2012). The CSOs supported were mostly smaller groups, including women’s and youth groups,

⁴³ Interview, 20 November 2021

⁴⁴ I use the terms ‘CSO’, ‘CBO’ and ‘NGO’ here, and in the paragraph below, based on how they are used in the original source material.

in different parts of the country, which received training in several different topics and, once trainings had been completed, were given a small grant, alongside further training and mentorship.⁴⁵ The programme had an expenditure of 37.5 million USD between 2005 and 2011 (USAID Regional Inspector General, 2012). Mercy Corps' management of the programme was criticised in a later audit, which concluded that the resource centres *"functioned minimally and lacked financial resources, staff, and equipment to operate as intended without more funds from donors"* (USAID Regional Inspector General, 2012: 4); another assessment noted that the project *"has been very costly... and is seen to have limited sustainability especially with respect to activities beyond supporting CSOs working in basic service delivery"* (Brandstetter et al., 2010: 24).

There are several other examples of programmes during this period that sought to fund, and 'build capacity' of, South Sudanese NGOs and CBOs. One was the South Sudan Recovery Fund (SSRF)'s small grants mechanism, administered by UNDP with the Bangladesh Rural Advancement committee (BRAC) as the Grant Coordinator, which between 2009 and 2012 disbursed small grants to 70 South Sudanese CBOs/NGOs across ten states, and provided training in proposal writing, financial management and monitoring and evaluation (Bennett et al., 2010; UNDP, n.d.). Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) engaged 32 CBOs from 2005 to 2009, *"teaching them how to operate as watchdogs and advocates for their communities"* (ibid: 231-232). PACT Sudan, through the South Sudan Peace Fund, worked with South Sudanese NGOs and CBOs more specifically in relation to peacebuilding. The South Sudan Peace Fund was established with support from Norwegian, Canadian and Danish governments, and later supported by DFID (Project Completion Review: South Sudan Peace Fund, 2012). Within this, PACT sought out *"local NGOs operating in rural areas, informed them of funding opportunities and aided the organisations in grant-writing"* (Washburne, 2010: 231). Between 2009 and 2012, PACT provided 93 small grants to 73 organisations across all states of South Sudan, with a median total value of 28,000 USD; many of these were for livelihoods projects, focusing on skills for income generation (Project Completion Review: South Sudan Peace Fund, 2012). An assessment noted that the grants were spread too thinly, and had very mixed results; but that PACT had developed *"positive relationships with a large number of local organisations in remote villages"* (ibid: 9). A small number of older South Sudanese NGOs were also involved in running capacity building programmes for other organisations.

⁴⁵ Interview, 20 November 2021

Beyond these multi-organisation programmes, individual South Sudanese NGOs often participated in capacity assessments and training organised by international organisations. 123 of the 142 NGOs surveyed by Wani in 2012, for example, had undergone an organisational capacity assessment and training since 2005, mostly facilitated by an international partner (Wani, 2012). The most covered topics were financial management, project cycle management and administration, and these assessments and trainings, Wani notes, were “*tailored to make local organizations compliant to donor/INGO needs*” (Wani, 2012: 4).

Beyond explicit capacity building programmes, South Sudanese NGOs were also shaped by the movement of staff between international and national NGOs, and by the specific requirements of international funding. These trends are clearly depicted in a 2015 article by Mark Massoud. Massoud describes how the international organisations that flocked to Juba after the 2005 CPA “*brought with them a common set of internal management and human resources procedures rooted in bureaucratic rules and abstract legal logic*”, which junior staff were required to abide by, and South Sudanese NGOs to replicate. The result was the flourishing of a new ‘legal order’, rooted in standardisation and formalisation, and predicated on “*plain knowledge of routine organizational practices, documentation procedures, strategic plans, and written files*” (Massoud, 2015: 334). This new legal order, structured through bureaucratic technologies – constitutions, contracts, handbooks and accounting systems – permeated the lives of civil society activists, generating:

a politics of aid work that privileges technical skill over rights mobilization, that pressures local activists to accept foreign bureaucratic forms, and that ultimately entrenches rather than topples historic inequalities between foreign aid workers and their local staff (Massoud, 2015: 335).

These varied legalistic and bureaucratic mechanisms allowed international aid agencies to construct the terms of their relationships with South Sudanese NGOs. To access funding, South Sudanese NGOs were required to adopt their own juridical processes and internal control systems, from time sheets and vehicle logs to procurement policies and departments and specific, hierarchical reporting structures (ibid). A constitution-writing industry emerged, with consultants drafted in to help national NGOs write organisational constitutions and policies, register with the government, design organisational structures and develop accountability systems (ibid). There was intense competition to replicate the internal processes of international organisations, with “*the most successful mimics... most likely to receive donor funding and the prestige that comes with it*” (Massoud, 2015: 353). As South Sudanese NGOs became better funded, they contracted more

work out to smaller organisations, resulting in an *“increasingly stratified domestic civil society”* (ibid: 354). Some national NGO staff members sought to resist, subvert or sidestep these new hierarchies and requirements; including by refusing to submit to certain juridical requirements (often interpreted by international managers as a lack of capacity); by asking others to ghost-write proposals, progress reports and other documents; or by choosing not to apply for donor funding (ibid).

By the end of the CPA interim period, there were growing numbers of increasingly professionalised South Sudanese NGOs, many of which had participated in ‘capacity building’ assessments and trainings of some shape or form. These varied capacity building initiatives and small grants programmes, alongside the increasing movement of staff between international and South Sudanese NGOs, and, in some cases, longer-term relationships between international and South Sudanese NGOs, helped establish a cohort of professional South Sudanese NGOs familiar with and capable of meeting stringent donor requirements. Hamsik, for example, suggests that during this period INGOs *“incubated some of today’s largest and most successful local humanitarian organizations”* (Hamsik, 2019: 10).

‘Capacity’ was largely synonymous with the ability to engage with, participate in and meet the requirements of the international humanitarian industry, and the organisations promoted were typically urban NGOs, following a particular organisational structure, with well-defined policies and constitutions, voluntary boards and paid staff, and funding models that centred around the implementation of projects subcontracted by international organisations. As Awany writes, after the CPA, the donor community *“largely ignored the existence of traditional forms of association and focused on creating, funding and nurturing civil society organisations that were closer to western models, with the aim of finding support for their state-building agenda in South Sudan”* (Awany, 2020: n.p.), encouraging a mimicry of international NGOs also clearly depicted by Massoud (2015). During this period, Virk & Nganje (2016: 9) suggest, national NGOs *“emerged to dominate the space, effectively overshadowing other forms of civil society”*, while patterns of funding promoted Juba-based NGOs to the exclusion of others (ibid). The overall picture is of a trend towards ‘dualism’ (Chahim & Prakash, 2014) or bifurcation between professional, foreign-funded NGOs (which grew in visibility and prestige), and South Sudan’s many other complex and varied forms of association; creating incentives for the latter to mimic the former, and further fuelling trends towards professionalisation.

4.4.3. South Sudanese NGOs in the humanitarian arena

Although South Sudanese NGOs were proliferating and professionalising, they remained relatively marginal to the international humanitarian industry, receiving only a very small proportion of the vast amounts of aid flowing into the country. The funding they did receive was mostly in the form either of short-term, prescriptive subcontracts from international agencies, or of small grants disbursed through the civil society strengthening programmes described above. In addition, the growing numbers of international organisations establishing a presence in South Sudan posed challenges as well as opportunities for South Sudanese NGOs and CBOs. Many lost staff to international organisations, which paid higher salaries, while operating costs increased as merchants and suppliers hiked their prices in response to the arrival of, and demand from, relatively cash-rich international agencies (Washburne, 2010).

Following the CPA, donors supported the establishment of an array of bilateral and pooled funding mechanisms in South Sudan, with South Sudan becoming a ‘guinea pig’ (Harvey, 2009) for new, multi-donor funding mechanisms. Apart from the US, which preferred to work bilaterally through NGOs or private contractors, pooled funds were central to the way in which funds were administered (Bennett et al., 2010). Examples included the World Bank-administered Multi Donor Trust Fund (MDTF), to which 650 million USD had been pledged by 2008 (Fenton & Phillips, 2009), and the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF), administered by UNDP, which received 204 million USD in contributions in 2007 (Harvey, 2009). These financing mechanisms favoured larger, foreign organisations, including the UN, INGOs and private companies, and South Sudanese NGOs were largely excluded (Bennett et al., 2010; Harvey, 2009). Most South Sudanese NGOs were not able to engage ‘substantively’ with either the MDTF or the CHF, for example, and only small numbers of South Sudanese NGOs received CHF funding (two in 2007, and five in 2008) (Fenton & Phillips, 2009).

The experiences of South Sudanese NGOs within the aid funding system during this period are discussed in the 2010 *Aiding the Peace* evaluation, which was based on over a year of research by a team of 16, across seven of South Sudan’s ten states (Bennett et al., 2010). Their assessment is telling in several ways, not least in that many of the same critiques could be made today. The authors write that the large and cumbersome financing mechanisms favoured in South Sudan,

tended to exclude local NGOs from direct association with donors and often reduced them to simple contracting roles, implementing programmes that they did not help to design. The short-term nature of

many interventions further reduces the opportunity for capacity building. NGOs find themselves being drawn from one project to another without being able to build up core skills or clarify their actual intentions. They engage in short bursts of activity rather than a sustained presence in particular localities. (Bennett et al., 2010: 102).

In addition, donors were reluctant to provide capital inputs such as vehicles and office equipment to Sudanese NGOs, instead supporting ‘capacity building’ through trainings (ibid). Schomerus and Allen, too, note that South Sudanese NGOs were often mistrusted, with assumptions made about their political affiliations and capabilities, and that,

The combination of mistrust of SNGOs [Sudanese NGOs] with their perceived lack of organisational capacity means that donors often fund INGOs directly, or in the attempt to ‘build local civil society’s capacity’ while limiting potential ‘risks’, provide SNGOs with funding through INGOs. As a result, many SNGOs feel that they are unequal partners in the development of their own country (Schomerus & Allen, 2010: 94).

4.5. South Sudanese NGOs after 2011

South Sudan became an independent country in 2011. This was followed, in 2012, by economic crisis (discussed in the next chapter), and in December 2013, by the eruption of violent conflict in Juba, which rapidly escalated and spread to other parts of the country. The devastating effects of this conflict are well-documented. Both the government and armed opposition groups committed extreme violence against civilians, including transgressions of international human rights and humanitarian law (see, *inter alia*, Human Rights Council, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2015, 2014). One, oft-cited statistic suggests that by 2018, the conflict had led to nearly 400,000 deaths, with the death toll concentrated in Jonglei State, Unity State, and the Equatorias, and highest in 2016-17 (Checchi et al., 2018). By 2018, more than four million people had been displaced, including around two million within South Sudan and another 2.2 million to neighbouring countries, and over half the population were facing severe food insecurity (UN OCHA, 2018b).

A peace agreement, the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), was signed in 2018. This was a power sharing agreement, in which positions in the transitional government at the national, state and local level were to be distributed between the parties to the agreement. Craze and Marko (2022: n.p.) argue that the R-ARCSS, through its

power sharing arrangements, “*created a behemoth: a centralized regime that appoints not only state governors, but even county commissioners, according to a political calculus determined in Juba.*” The deal, they argue, “*largely destroyed whatever popular legitimacy the South Sudanese political system once had*”, with around 2,400 of 3,000 politicians now directly appointed from Juba (ibid.). A 2022 assessment by the UN Panel of Experts on South Sudan concurred, stating that, “*rather than breaking the violent cycle of elite political bargaining in South Sudan, the 2018 [R-ARCSS] has become part of it*” (UN Security Council, 2022: 2/77). Violence has continued in many parts of the country, and in some places, has escalated significantly (Craze & Marko, 2022). Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation has continued to deteriorate: in 2023, eight million people – around two-thirds of the population – were facing severe food insecurity (UN OCHA, 2022). Since 2013, humanitarian funding for South Sudan has consistently been above one billion US dollars annually (UN OCHA, 2022), though funding appears to be stagnating, with the gap between estimated needs and available funding growing year-on-year (CAFOD & Development Initiatives, 2023).

The return to conflict in December 2013 brought massive changes for all South Sudanese NGOs. However, different organisations were affected in different ways, influenced by various factors including their location within the country, and the type of work they did. Many organisations were directly affected by the violence, with their staff displaced and their offices looted; this happened at different times in different parts of the country, as the conflict spread.

International funding flows switched from a developmental, state-building agenda to a highly centralised humanitarian response led from Juba (Sørbø et al., 2016). Many of the large programmes that had been supporting civil society organisations were cancelled or scaled down (Deng, 2019). Governance and human rights-focused organisations, those working on more chronic conditions, such as HIV, and those engaged in activities seen as longer-term or more broadly ‘developmental’, saw their funding drop away, in some cases almost overnight. In one very typical quote, for example, the leader of a women’s rights organisation described, of a three-year project designed to improve reporting of sexual and gender-based violence by supporting the recruitment of female police officers, “*by the time we moved to the second year, the conflict erupted and the whole thing went to zero*”.⁴⁶ The founder of an organisation supporting people living with HIV described, “*the money that was there for HIV all turned to humanitarian... we cannot access that money. ... They want something which is short short and it is ending. So as a result, most of the money goes for the*

⁴⁶ Interview, 2 August 2019 (c)

*humanitarian. And they say HIV is now a chronic thing, it is no longer a hot cake like it used to be.*⁴⁷ Some international organisations and donors left South Sudan and did not return, terminating their partnerships with South Sudanese NGOs and the contracts of their national staff.⁴⁸ Funding decisions were made at the national level, and even areas of the country that remained relatively peaceful until later in the conflict (such as parts of Western and Eastern Equatoria, and Western Bahr-el-Ghazal) lost funding as the modus operandi switched to humanitarianism.

Though civic space in South Sudan was already constrained, political repression increased after independence, a trend that accelerated with the return to widespread war. Freedom of expression and association are curtailed, with national security authorisation required for all public meetings and the media tightly controlled (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Amnesty International (2021), Human Rights Watch (2020) and the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan (UN HRC, 2022) have all documented abuses of civil society activists and government critics, including arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, disappearance and extrajudicial killings, fostering “*an atmosphere of fear and oppression*” (ibid: 4). Civil society activists in South Sudan face regular surveillance from security forces, and “*potentially from anyone within their communities, or in organised civil society, who may be reporting on them*” (Ibreck, 2019: 187). This monitoring has limited spaces for public deliberation, impeded collective action and eroded trust (ibid).

Growing political repression has had a pervasive effect on South Sudanese NGOs, driving organisations towards service provision and away from any activities that could be deemed politically controversial. One interviewee, who had worked for several years in a role that involved supporting South Sudanese NGOs and CSOs across the country, explained how this had affected the organisations he worked with, noting,

*Some of those national organisations are human rights base organisations, their mandate is to promote human rights, to monitor human rights, and you know, after the crisis of 2013, you cannot talk about human rights in this country, you cannot talk about governance, you cannot talk about transparency. So, some of these NGOs naturally had to close.*⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Interview, 5 August 2019 (a)

⁴⁸ Interviews, 2 September 2019, 16 November 2021

⁴⁹ Interview, December 2021

Another interviewee, who had worked for or with South Sudanese NGOs in various capacities for two decades, reflected that, “*the post-independence war changed the dynamics completely... the element of suspicion and mistrust grew.*” He continued,

*Much as we have so many national organisations now working in South Sudan, it is possible to work on humanitarian issues without having more challenges. If you're giving water to communities, you're giving non-food items, food, you are okay. But if you are talking about rights and responsibilities, if you are empowering communities to begin asking critical questions, then that becomes extremely difficult. And, of course, you know, the laws, set of laws that have been put in place that makes the space to shrink.*⁵⁰

Some well-established NGOs were hit heavily by this new context, with some combination of violence, displacement, changing donor trends, shrinking civic space and the severing of communications and transport between Juba and many other parts of the country making their work untenable.⁵¹ One organisation, for example, was primarily affected in 2015-2016, when the conflict spread to the area in which they were based. At this point, many of their staff fled the country. Their existing work was no longer tenable: “*you can no longer do trainings, you can no longer do community development, because community has become fluid and they are on the run, others are already in IDP sites.*”⁵² By 2017 they had closed down “*almost to zero*”. Their staff numbers fell from close to a hundred to less than 20, and their annual budget, which had been upwards of one million USD, fell to around 300,000. Another organisation, founded in the early 2000s, had around 300 members of staff by 2013. With the outbreak of conflict, many members of staff were displaced, including the director. The organisation’s offices were looted, and they lost most of their assets. The director reflects, “*we were almost closing, even myself I have to run away for some time. Up to 2014, we had to start afresh, like this was not existing*”.⁵³

Yet, while some organisations struggled to survive this new context, others thrived, positioning themselves as crucial intermediaries in an increasingly risk-averse humanitarian system. The

⁵⁰ Interview, November 2021. The laws referred to here are the 2016 NGO Act and the 2016 Relief and Rehabilitation Commission Act, which replaced the SPLM’s 2003 NGO Act, mentioned above. The 2016 NGO Act defines an NGO as a “*non-profit voluntary organization formed by two or more persons, not being public bodies, with the intention of undertaking voluntary or humanitarian projects*” (Non-Governmental Organizations Act 2016: 5). NGOs must register with the government, and certificates of registration must be renewed annually. Operational licenses may be denied if the organisation contravenes operating principles; or if the organisation has any “*involvement with tribal and political differences in the country*” (ibid: 8).

⁵¹ Road transport became more dangerous, and in opposition-held areas such as Ganyiel, mobile phone communications were severed.

⁵² Interview, 18 November 2021

⁵³ Interview, 21 March 2020

outbreak of fighting in December 2013 sparked a “*mass exodus of aid personnel*” (Clarke et al., 2015: 28); there were widespread evacuations from Juba, and from the states worst affected by conflict, in the north-east. In some cases, when international organisations evacuated, South Sudanese NGOs took over their operations, proving themselves in the process. For a small number of national NGOs, this led to rapid growth. This was particularly the case for those organisations with staff in Juba, able to attend coordination meetings and liaise with international agencies, and whose founders and directors had significant experience of humanitarian operations, often from years spent working within international organisations, and thus had the contacts and knowledge necessary to engage with the humanitarian system.

One NGO director, for example, had worked for another South Sudanese relief organisation for 15 years, before establishing a new organisation in 2013. By December, he reflects, “*we could see the signs of trouble in the country*”; by the 15th, violence had erupted:

*War broke out... and I would say that ushered in new opportunities for us because, it was very terrible, so many people were killed, and international NGOs ran away. There were no NGOs apart from ICRC, MSF, all the NGOs took off. We were here and [they] had to rely on our expertise to start implementing... That brought in a lot of opportunities for us to access funding. And we ended up being I think, one of the biggest emergency responders in the country.*⁵⁴

The organisation went from having one project worth around 20,000 US dollars in 2013, to operating in three states with a turnover of four to five million dollars one year later. Another example came from a conversation with the founder and director of one of South Sudan’s largest NGOs. He had previously worked for international organisations in South Sudan. In the early 2010s, with some friends, he set up a national NGO, with the original aim of focusing on youth empowerment and sustainable development. In 2013, when his contract with his current employer ended, he began to focus full time on the organisation. He recounts,

I came [to the organisation full-time] in November, and unfortunately, in December, the war broke out. And it was unfortunate, but it seemed to work to our advantage a little bit. Because what then happened was the withdrawal of international staff, most of the international NGOs actually moved out. So you found that most of the remaining people, most of them were local actors, local organizations, and not many of them actually had the experience I had in the humanitarian world, and the understanding of

⁵⁴ Interview, 12 November 2021 (a)

how the whole architecture worked, because of my previous experience with [names of international organisations]. So that seemed to work for our advantage, because we became like the central figure in the humanitarian system, because of my knowledge. And, and we tend to get a lot of different partnerships with different organizations, including with my former employers... we did a lot of project implementation for them.

The organisation went from having less than ten staff members in 2014 to almost 100 the following year, and from working in one state to several different parts of the country. They now have an annual budget of several million US dollars. Accessing this funding required substantial changes to the organisation, including a change of focus, and the creation of new departments and systems:

We had to comply to the international standards in humanitarian aid. So, when we conform with that, and we invest in systems and capacity development, so, a lot of organizations start trusting the systems and started giving us resources, a lot of UN agencies, international organisations ... we started working with a lot of these partners. Because the biggest measuring yard was accountability. And we put up a system for accountability in a way that in a way that met the international standards, and we are expected to produce audits, so, the audits from recognized firms.⁵⁵

Numerous similar stories emerged across interviews, of very rapid organisational growth for highly professional organisations with well-connected and experienced directors and senior staff. One humanitarian-oriented NGO, headquartered in Juba and operating primarily in Unity State, went from having no funding in 2017, to around 30,000 USD in 2018, 150,000 in 2019, 400,000 by 2020 and around a million by 2020. Another received a first grant of 15,000 USD in 2016; the following year, they had an income of 350,000 USD, rising to 750,000 in 2018, 950,000 in 2019, and 1.5 million in 2020; by the time of our interview in late 2021, they had received over 2.5 million USD that year.

Precise data on the numbers of South Sudanese NGOs are hard to come by, but indications point towards significant growth. Ali et al. (2018: 19) write that “*the number of NNGOs in South Sudan has grown dramatically in the last few years*”; they note that ‘many’ of these NGOs are less than three years old, and that the majority of their funding comes from humanitarian sources. A figure from South Sudan’s RRC, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, puts the number of registered

⁵⁵ Interview, 19 November 2021 (a)

local or national NGOs in South Sudan at just under 1,800 (InterAction, 2023). South Sudanese NGOs are highly diverse, varying in their histories, identities, geographical focus and presence, size, and in the type of work they do.

In addition, over the last ten years, the number of national NGOs included in the South Sudan Humanitarian Response Plans (HRP) has increased significantly: from 29 in 2014, to 40 in 2016, 95 in 2018 and 143 in 2020 (UN OCHA, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019). Overall, however, funding going towards South Sudanese NGOs remained relatively small; a 2015 Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation (IAHE) of the first years of the response notes that the overall share of funding going to national NGOs in 2014 was around 1%, and decreased between 2013 and 2014 (Clarke et al., 2015). The evaluation notes that the increasing complexity of the humanitarian architecture – particularly after a level 3 emergency had been declared – required substantial resources and experience to navigate; national NGOs needed full-time staff in Juba with substantial experience of humanitarian operations to compete with international organisations, and tended to be “*caught in a dilemma of ‘no projects no funding; no funding no projects’*” (Clarke et al., 2015: 48). A 2016 study concluded that the potential contribution of South Sudanese NGOs to the humanitarian response had not been realised, and that the humanitarian system “*remains internationally led and exclusive, consistently recognising the role of just a few NNGOs*” (Tanner & Moro, 2016: 7); another noted that a relatively small number of South Sudanese NGOs became the “*partner of choice*” for funders, while INGO and UN officials reflected that they were “*all partnering with the same partners*” (Hamsik, 2019: 20).

Finally, while the post-2005 period saw a movement of NGO leaders into the government, the last decade has seen a shift in the other direction. The collapse in the value of government-paid salaries since 2012 has played an important role in motivating movement between the governmental and non-governmental sectors, as described in the next chapter, but it is certainly not the whole picture. Rather, interlocutors’ narratives point to a complex mix of motivations for movement between governmental and non-governmental roles and organisations, in which differences in salary intertwine with moral and pragmatic assessments of the state of South Sudanese politics and with perceptions of the prospects for achieving change in and through different spheres. In the context of “*overarching neglect of the citizenry by the government*” (Düng et al., 2021: 7), interviewees described having turned to the NGO sphere in their efforts to provide services, create employment, and, in various ways, to support their community or contribute to the development of the country.

In interviews, NGO work was sometimes presented as an explicit alternative to ‘politics’. One interviewee, for example, had held a political position in a state-level government prior to 2013. After the conflict erupted in 2013, however, he reflects, *“looking at the events, I said, no, conflict again? After all my life was in the conflict and the struggle, no, I say no... no struggle again, after independence.”* He lost interest in ‘politics’, because, he says, *“politics to me was very ugly, it is ethnic, tribal. I decided to officially register [name of organisation].”* He continued, *“I didn’t want to be in politics, I just wanted to do this kind of work, I want to be active in the community, in the society. Not just sitting. Here you cannot afford to, even to be sitting, not doing anything.”*⁵⁶ Another interviewee had worked for several national and international organisations and was now the director of a small national NGO. He reflected, similarly, *“Government and the politics is about providing services to the community. And if you are not providing services... why should I join such politics, rather than to see another way for me to provide services, which is what I’m doing now.”*⁵⁷ A third interviewee, the director of a small NGO, argued, *“the way I’m seeing our politicians, they are not going to change anything now, because they are struggling with power.... if you just go now, you will still go and fall in the same hole, and you will not make any changes. And then you will consider yourself that you have done nothing.”*⁵⁸ In these, and other similar examples, narratives of transitions into NGO work, either away from or as an alternative to politics, were often bound up with a deep sense of frustration and disillusionment at the direction the country had taken since independence, and a sense that efforts to create change were not currently possible through ‘politics’.

Somewhat paradoxically, a role as service providers also grants NGOs a degree of power and can lead to growing influence for their founders and directors, particularly in the cases of larger organisations. This could lead to risks for directors that needed to be carefully managed. One NGO director reflected, for example, *“there were some NGOs that came up very powerful, but the directors ended up going to the government. And that’s why also the government have problem with the local NGOs, they say it is another way of marketing yourself in the eyes of the communities. You do a lot of work, and then they [the community] begin to say, so and so, he should be our leader, because we know his past records.”*⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Interview, 27 October 2021

⁵⁷ Interview, 25 October 2021

⁵⁸ Interview, 7 November 2021

⁵⁹ Interview, 10 November 2021

4.6. Conclusion

The last three decades have seen a dramatic NGO boom in South Sudan, encompassing an expansion not only in the number of South Sudanese NGOs, but in their budgets and the numbers of people they employ. The previous chapter sought to position this within a longer historical timeframe, while this chapter has examined some of the drivers of, and dynamics within, South Sudan's more recent expansion of NGOs. Taken together, the chapters provide historical context to the remainder of the thesis.

South Sudan has a long history of organisation and association that stretches far beyond its recent proliferation of NGOs, including urban and ethnic associations, student and trade unions, and women and youth groups. Its more recent proliferation of professional NGOs began in earnest in the 1990s, in the context of devastating conflict, widespread displacement, and a large-scale humanitarian operation. Though shaped, in some cases, by OLS and the 'capacity building' interventions that accompanied it, as depicted in the previous chapter, these organisations were highly varied and often intensely political. Some supported the SPLM/A (though not uncritically), seeking, for example, to put the SPLM/A 'on test', in the case of Dr Deng, or to start 'rebuilding' South Sudan behind SPLA lines. Others sought to mobilise and support displaced South Sudanese in Khartoum, and to challenge harassment and marginalisation experienced in the north, as a way of responding to the conflict without taking up arms. Several gained acceptance as aid organisations within OLS, receiving funding to deliver services as subcontractors to international organisations during a period of armed conflict.

Despite the movement of prominent NGO leaders into the nascent South Sudanese government, NGOs proliferated after the CPA, influenced by various dynamics including large-scale returns to South Sudan from neighbouring countries and a relative expansion of civic space. The presence of international aid agencies created some opportunities for funding, but also challenges, raising the costs of goods and rent, and offering higher salaries that made it harder for South Sudanese organisations to retain staff. Through 'capacity building' programmes and the requirements of accessing funding, international organisations drove trends towards professionalisation, bureaucratisation and managerialism, as clearly articulated by Massoud (2015), though these pressures have also been resisted in various ways.

Escalating conflict and growing political repression after 2012-13 affected different organisations in different ways. The escalation of conflict and associated access constraints provided

opportunities to highly professional, relief-oriented organisations, resulting in rapid growth for a small number of well-connected, Juba-based organisations.

However, the story of South Sudan's NGO boom is not just a story about the expansion of the NGO sector in and of itself, but also about the increasing importance of NGO employment to aspirations for upward socio-economic mobility and of NGO salaries to people's survival strategies, in the context of a changing economy. This is the focus of the next chapter.

5. NGOs, Class and Inequality: NGO Employment in a Changing Political Economy

5.1. Chapter introduction

This chapter traces the growing demand for NGO employment in South Sudan. It examines the shifting position of NGOs and NGO employment in the context of South Sudan's changing political economy, and in relation to processes of class formation and stratification. The central contention of the chapter is that it is impossible to understand South Sudan's proliferation of NGOs, or the increased desirability of NGO employment and the implications of this for changing professional aspirations and identities, without attention to far-reaching economic and social changes that have taken place in South Sudan in recent decades, and particularly since the 2005 CPA. These changes have substantially heightened competition for NGO employment. In South Sudan, NGOs are one of very few sources of waged labour in a context of profound economic scarcity, and NGO salaries frequently support extended networks of people. In this way, NGO employment provides opportunities for personal and professional advancement, but is also imbricated in processes of class stratification and growing inequality.

The chapter argues for both the importance and complexity of class as a lens in relation to studies of labour dynamics in the humanitarian industry. I understand class, following Liechty, not as a fixed, uniform, 'trans-historical category', but rather as a *"complex, located, lived experience that, though always relational in its dynamic, in content will never be the same twice"* (Liechty, 2012: 275). This relational aspect is key: *"class formations emerge only in relation to other classes, none more so than middle classes, which appear between—and in constitutive tension with—classes above and below"* (Heiman et al., 2012: 13). Following Mercer and Lemanski (2020) and Spronk (2020), rather than attempting to fix, define or delineate a discrete, singular South Sudanese 'middle class', I consider the middle classes as shifting, slippery 'classification-in-the-making', and consider the varied and heterogeneous experiences of those located in a position of relative but precarious prosperity. I suggest that NGO work has become central to 'doing being middle class' (Lentz, 2020) in South Sudan, but also that the heterogeneity of experiences and positions within this group complicate any notion of a straightforward or singular NGO elite or NGO class.

There is relatively little academic work on class in South Sudan, and certainly no consensus on what class and class boundaries mean in this context. That which does exist has focused overwhelmingly on a small politico-military elite: a 'gun class' (D'Agoût, 2018, 2021), a 'military

aristocracy' with a 'lower stratum' of followers, maintained through clientelism and nepotism (Pinaud, 2014), or an expensive and turbulent 'political marketplace' (de Waal, 2014). Some NGO workers in South Sudan may be intertwined with these political networks, to varying degrees, but they are certainly not synonymous with them. In addition, as Pendle (2021: 348) writes, such research has often left the perception that "*non-elites are naively accepting or victims of their powerful, elite masters*", overlooking the complexity of relationships between national political elites and the home communities and constituencies on which they may rely (Pendle, 2021). More broadly, the history of class stratification in South Sudan remains underdeveloped, with little attention to class beyond the SPLM/A's military leadership (Kindersley & Majok, 2022). Yet, in the context of the rapid monetisation and marketisation of South Sudanese society (Thomas, 2015, 2019), understanding shifting dynamics of inequality, as well as the formation of new 'classification[s]-in-the-making' (Spronk, 2020), is crucial.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to conduct a full analysis of the history and contemporary dynamics of class in South Sudan, which is a large, complex and underdeveloped topic, and a crucial subject for further research. It focuses only on the experiences of NGO workers, a small segment of the South Sudanese citizenry. What this chapter seeks to do is to situate their experiences within what we *do* know about class stratification and growing inequality in South Sudan, considering the fraught and complex position of NGOs and NGO employment during a period of significant change in South Sudan.

The chapter is structured across four sections. The first seeks to introduce the social, political and economic changes in South Sudan that have incorporated growing segments of the South Sudanese population into precarious and intermittent waged labour, and that have squeezed the space for other ways of life (Diing et al., 2021; Kindersley & Majok, 2019, 2022). It summarises recent scholarship on South Sudan's market transition, and on the ways in which this is bound up with processes of class formation and stratification. This is a necessarily brief discussion of a complex topic,⁶⁰ but I include it here because I believe it to be integral to understanding the contemporary position of NGOs and NGO employment in South Sudan. The second section considers the forms of learning valorised through NGO work, and the implications of South Sudan's changing political economy for shifting professional aspirations. The third section highlights the widespread sharing of NGO salaries across extended family networks, as well as

⁶⁰ I would direct readers interested to learn more to recent work associated particularly with the Rift Valley Institute, including Thomas (2019), Diing et al. (2021) and Kindersley and Majok (2019, 2022), as well as Craze (2023a, 2023b). This work has significantly influenced my own thinking, as reflected in this chapter.

the significant heterogeneity of incomes, experiences and positions amongst those employed by NGOs in South Sudan, which, it argues, complicates ideas of a straightforward NGO elite or NGO class (c.f. Petras, 1999; Schuller, 2009). The final section considers who can access NGO employment and how this has changed as NGO work has become more competitive, exploring the role of language and education, and the ways in which this leads to the replication of inequalities in South Sudanese society.

5.2. NGOs in a changing political economy

5.2.1. Marketisation and class stratification in South Sudan

South Sudan's proliferation of NGOs, growing competition for NGO employment and shifting professional aspirations need to be placed in the context of the country's market transition, and the expansion of waged labour. Over the last five decades, South Sudan has experienced a transition from varied and largely self-sufficient subsistence systems organised around kinship and social networks, to a deeply unequal market economy, encompassing processes of class stratification, the commodification of food, land, labour and education, and a growing dependence on money and markets (Aquila, 2021; Kindersley & Majok, 2022; Thomas, 2015, 2019). Many people have been pushed into precarious and exploitative paid work, linked to processes of marketisation and monetisation of the economy that have also undermined long-standing practices of collective work, mutuality and reciprocity (Kindersley & Majok, 2022; Thomas, 2019). These processes can be traced back at least a century, as discussed in chapter three, but they accelerated over the last 50 years, partly through the changes wrought by decades of conflict and displacement, and then through the far-reaching changes that followed the CPA (Aquila, 2021; Kindersley & Majok, 2022; Thomas, 2019).

The period following the 2005 CPA was one of rapid and profound social and economic change in South Sudan, and spiralling inequality. During these years, Kindersley and Majok (2019: 4) write, the South Sudanese economy was "*reworked around the market, using the instruments of cash, debt and paid work*". This benefited a cash-rich minority, while impoverishing and immiserating many others (see Diing et al., 2021; Kindersley & Majok, 2022; Majok, 2022; Thomas, 2019). Some four million people returned from displacement, and there was dramatic economic growth, fuelled by newfound access to oil reserves, and by international investment (Diing et al., 2021). From 2005, South Sudan was in receipt of around two billion USD per year in oil revenues (Fenton & Phillips, 2009); annual per capita income rose dramatically, from 506 USD in 2003 to 1199 USD in 2007 (ibid). Yet, these figures mask vast inequalities, and South Sudan's growth

benefited only a minority of its citizens. Some people, in some parts of the country, benefited from international investment (including aid) and expanding employment opportunities, while others experienced continued violence and growing economic insecurity (Diing et al., 2021; Maxwell et al., 2016). Most private sector investment, for example, was concentrated in Central Equatoria State (Martin & Mosel, 2011), while Jonglei and Upper Nile States experienced significant conflict and saw little recovery of livelihoods during the CPA period (Maxwell et al., 2016). Corruption was pervasive; an audit of the Government's 2006 accounts indicated one billion USD had 'disappeared', while president Salva Kiir at one point admitted that four billion USD had been siphoned away by government ministers (World Bank, 2017). As numerous analysts have explored, this period saw the consolidation of a politico-military elite class, formed through the wars of the 1980s and 1990s and strengthened, using state resources, during the CPA interim period (Craze, 2023a; D'Agôot, 2021). Yet, it also saw the expansion of a complexly positioned, heterogeneous salaried class, which has received far less attention.

After the CPA, there was a large expansion of government employment in South Sudan, both in the civil service and in the security sector, funded by oil revenues (Diing et al., 2021). Much of this was in the security sector. The number of people in the national army, the SPLA, increased from 40,000 in 2005 to 240,000 in 2011, with another 90,000 people employed in the organised forces, including the police and wildlife services (World Bank, 2017: 4). Some of these people had previously been in armed but unsalaried forces that were absorbed into the SPLA: the CPA had established the SPLA as a national army, and numerous other armed militias in the south integrated into the SPLA through the 2006 Juba Declaration. More broadly, Thomas writes, the oil boom *"funded a huge government payroll of as many as 400,000 people, perhaps half of which were in the army and security services"* (Thomas, 2019:75).

For members of an educated class, formed, to a significant extent, by individuals returning from refugee camps and cities in neighbouring countries, there were many opportunities. A considerable number of interlocutors had worked in local government during this period, or in state and national ministries. One interviewee, for example, had been born in South Sudan, but grew up as a refugee in Uganda, where he studied from the beginning of primary school up to university. He completed a bachelor's degree in Uganda, sponsored by an international NGO. He returned to South Sudan in 2006, after finishing university, recalling:

*In 2006, there were a lot of employment opportunities, especially for those you know who have had the opportunity to go up to the university level. So, I crossed to Sudan. I came to Juba for the first time. When I came to Juba, I got a job. My first job was with the Ministry of Education.*⁶¹

The expansion of salaried government employment transformed the purchasing power of many households, albeit unequally, giving many access to cash they did not have before (Thomas, 2019). Those employed in new, salaried government jobs often sent money to family and invested in private businesses (Diing et al., 2021), and the amount of money in circulation in South Sudan increased substantially (Aquila, 2021).

Other trends contributed to the expansion of waged labour, and to the growing use of money in South Sudan. With the large-scale returns to South Sudan that followed the CPA, people needed cash to re-establish safe homes, schooling and healthcare, and increasingly relied on imports of food, drugs and homewares, which tied people further into the cash economy (Kindersley and Majok, 2022). Many of the millions of people that returned to South Sudan had spent years or decades living in cities or refugee camps in neighbouring countries, and on their return to South Sudan settled in urban areas (Leonardi & Santschi, 2016; Majok, 2022), relying on markets to meet their food needs (FAO et al., 2012). Food purchase spread widely, while land grabs, displacement and urban sprawl put further pressure on the subsistence system (Thomas, 2019). In a 2010 study on urbanisation and vulnerability in Juba, research participants described the introduction of financial capital, and the need to access cash, as the most difficult aspect of urban livelihoods; as one participant commented, *“everything is there, but we need money in order to access anything from land and school fees to food”* (Martin & Mosel, 2011: 13).

Importantly, this period also saw growing privatisation and commodification of land, with resource exploitation, commercial agriculture and urbanisation all contributing to rising land values (Leonardi & Santschi, 2016). Individuals who invested in residential plots in towns after the CPA profited from soaring urban land prices (Leonardi & Santschi, 2016). Most people, however, had little means of earning a monetary income and were not in a position to purchase land, placing them at risk of dispossession from land they would formerly have accessed through customary systems of land rights (ibid). Kindersley and Majok describe how, after 2012, wealthy residents of northern Bahr-el-Ghazal bought up large swathes of agricultural land from families

⁶¹ Interview, 8 December 2021 (b)

struggling with the rapidly increasing cost of healthcare and education, then renting this land back to local residents (Kindersley & Majok, 2022).

These changes, Kindersley and Majok argue, have precipitated rapid class stratification in South Sudan, and growing concentrations of family wealth. This has benefited a small minority of cash-rich people – mostly a growing class of private landowners, commercial farmers and military entrepreneurs – while driving many others into debt, often in the form of short-term, high interest loans, and insecure paid labour (Kindersley & Majok, 2022).⁶² Those with money to invest benefited from land enclosure and sales, and from changes in the South Sudanese economy; this includes those who had gained wealth in the SPLM/A or by working in the aid industry, and who, after 2005, invested in commercial farming, private schools and market businesses created by the restructuring of land, labour and trade markets (Kindersley & Majok, 2022). Kindersley and Majok also argue that the humanitarian and development apparatus, with its focus on market forces and on independent entrepreneurship as a route out of poverty, and its influx of dollars supporting individual salaries and connected industries, “*fundamentally supported the marketisation of South Sudan’s local economies*” (ibid: 4); and that the aid industry, including the UN, international aid industries and associated industries, such as car and compound rentals, has “*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*” (ibid: 4).

In sum, by 2012, people across South Sudan were increasingly bound into the money economy. This is exemplified by changes in the production and distribution of grain, the main source of calories for most people in South Sudan, as explored in a meticulously researched report by Edward Thomas. Where 50 years ago, households in South Sudan produced most of the grain they ate, today they buy the majority of the grain and cereals they eat from markets, which accounts for nearly all their spending (Thomas, 2019). People need money for food, goods and services, and this is changing everyday life and aspirations, increasing indebtedness, and heightening the need to find paid work (ibid). It is also driving hunger, and is integrally linked to South Sudan’s now-widespread, devastating food insecurity. As Thomas summarises, in South Sudan, “*food insecurity is linked to the way that communities have been drawn into dependence on food markets which they cannot afford*” (Thomas, 2015: 292). The culmination of these changes, Kindersley and Majok (2022: 5) write, of the Sudan/South Sudan borderlands where their research was

⁶² It is worth noting that Kindersley and Majok’s research took place primarily in northern Bahr-el-Ghazal, a region that was heavily impacted by wartime displacement; patterns may have been somewhat different in different parts of the country.

conducted, is the “*near-comprehensive capturing of the region’s population into financialised, marketised insecurity and dependence, straining and breaking systems of reciprocity... [and] the inculcation of neoliberal capitalist realism – that no other economic life is possible beyond individual self-promotion within the market oligopoly*”. Older residents of the borderlands emphasised, since the 1970s, “*money’s capture of all aspects of life... and the increasing difficulty of ‘surviving outside’ of money and markets*” (Kindersley & Majok, 2022: 5). This is fundamental to the changing position of NGOs in South Sudan, and to the growing contestation over NGO employment in a context of the expansion of a neoliberal capitalist economy, the shrinking space for survival outside this economy, and the profound lack of other options for salaried employment, particularly in the context of South Sudan’s post-2012 economic crisis.

5.2.2. NGO employment in a time of economic crisis

By the late 2000s, wages were declining, small-scale trading was becoming less profitable, and, as more people returned to the country, competition for jobs increased (Martin & Mosel, 2011; Murphy, 2018). At the same time, living costs appeared to be rising, with school fees, medicine and food becoming more expensive; in urban areas, there was more food in the markets than before, but it was increasingly unaffordable (Martin & Mosel, 2011). Households were increasingly dependent on markets to meet their food needs: in 2011, severely and moderately food insecure households spent much of their total household expenditure (64% and 69% respectively) on food (ibid), while food secure households spent around 16% of household income on food. This left people highly vulnerable to economic shocks and food price inflation.

In 2012, during a dispute with the Government of Sudan over oil transit fees, the South Sudanese government shut down all oil production, which, at that time, accounted for 98% of the South Sudanese government’s revenues (World Bank, 2013). This catalysed a financial crisis in South Sudan. The government introduced an ‘austerity budget’ and cut transfers to the states, spurring the collapse of government systems; the military however ignored the new constraints, proceeding to spend almost another one billion USD that year (de Waal, 2014; Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017; World Bank, 2013). There was rapid inflation, which accelerated further with the outbreak of conflict in 2013, and worsened as conflict continued and global oil prices fell; year-on-year inflation was 661.3% from July 2015 to July 2016, and 730% from August 2015 to August 2016 (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017), and the South Sudanese pound lost almost 80% of its value across the dollar in the year to August 2016 (Ministry of Finance and Planning, 2016). On the parallel market, where much currency exchange takes place, the SSP depreciated from

two SSP to the dollar at independence, to 70 to the dollar by August 2016, and 172 by August 2017 (Pape & Dihel, 2017). Food prices skyrocketed; 10kg of flour, for example, could be bought for around 16 SSP in Juba in 2012, rising to 1000 SSP by 2017 (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017). These changes hit urban households hard, given their growing reliance on waged labour (Pape & Dihel, 2017), and poverty amongst wage-earning households increased from 28% in 2015 to 62% in 2016 (ibid).

Crucially, South Sudan's post-2013 war, Craze (2023) argues, did not disrupt the shift towards markets and waged labour, nor towards class stratification and growing inequality, but rather intensified it. Conflict and displacement undermined small-scale farming and facilitated the transfer of land from which people had been displaced to political elites. These elites have established large farms, onto which people are then employed to work for low wages (ibid). Across a series of papers, Craze has shown how the displacements of war have *"allowed the elite to monopolize control of land and wealth"* (Craze, 2023: 17), facilitating a 'massive' wealth transfer towards the military and political elite, and enabling the maintenance of a politico-military elite class despite the collapse of oil revenues (Craze, 2019, 2022, 2023). The threat of violence, Craze argues, is no longer *"intra-elite, it is inter-class, with the consequence that the elite compact in is strengthened, despite the violence that occurs in the rest of the country"* (Craze, 2023: 18). Individual actors within this class may shift, and gain or lose power, but the class itself has become stronger.

Beyond this elite class, the situation for the vast majority of South Sudanese people has deteriorated since 2012, including those members of a precariously positioned, salaried middle class that had been working as civil servants, teachers, and local government officials. After 2012, both government employment and foreign investment collapsed, as did many small private businesses under the pressure of rapid inflation (Diing et al., 2021). At all but the very highest levels, government salaries stagnated; government employees, including teachers, civil servants and soldiers, often go unpaid for months at a time, and when salaries do arrive, rampant inflation means they are worth very little. For example, a soldier's monthly salary of 1500 SSP had purchasing power of around 200 USD in 2013; by 2021, this was worth around three USD (Schouten et al., 2021).

Many interviewees, now engaged in NGOs, had previously worked in government-paid jobs, including as teachers, or in local government. Interviewees explained how surviving in a government-paid jobs became increasingly untenable, as the value of their salaries plummeted,

while the cost of food and other goods increased. One interviewee, a woman who had worked for several years as a civil servant in a local government, explained that after 2013, things went to ‘zero’: salaries became a problem, she could not pay her children’s school fees, and “*things were not okay*”.⁶³ Another, a man who had been working as a civil servant in a state-level ministry, explained that he had liked his career ‘very much’. After 2013, however, “*there is this issue of historic measures for the government, of which the salaries also, the value is going down, plus even it's not coming in time. And we became like also working for free.*” His children were sent away from school because he could not pay their school fees; he worried that, even when they returned, they would have fallen behind. He felt like, “*it is all lost. That's why, I thought about it, in fact, I cried. My tears came now. And since that, I decided that, if that is the case, I have once worked with the organisations, and there is nothing that can fear me going back, why don't I actually shift?*”⁶⁴ He had previously worked for an international organisation and began looking again for work in the aid industry.

It is not new that NGOs offered better wages than the public sector; this was often also the case prior to 2012, though the scale of the differential increased significantly. Nor is it unique to South Sudan (see, e.g., Pfeiffer et al., 2008; Sherr et al., 2012). Nonetheless, the scale of South Sudan’s economic crisis, with rising prices, inflation and the collapse of government employment, has dramatically increased both the desirability of, and competition for, UN and NGO jobs. Crucially, UN agencies, international NGOs and many national NGOs pay their staff in dollars, which hold their value in the face of South Sudan’s rampant inflation. As Diing et al. (2021:19) confirm, drawing on their research with young people in several different parts of the country,

Aspirations have changed with this economic crisis. Jobs with the UN and NGOs, which promise secure pay and often in US dollars, were sought during the post-CPA period, but have now become more preferable than government jobs, which are seen as less reliable and often pay less... for young people with educational qualifications, the collapse of the formal job market (primarily the civil service and private sector petty trade) has deepened competition and employment discrimination, especially by class, gender and ethnicity.

It is the fraught combination of cash scarcity, an accelerating shift to a cash-based economy, economic crisis and deep inequality, that has made NGO employment so highly sought-after: the

⁶³ Interview, 20 August 2019 (b)

⁶⁴ Interview, 2 December 2021

aid industry “pays salaries with actual purchasing power and is one of few remaining reliable sources of income in the country” (Santschi et al., 2018: 12). One source suggests that around 25,000 national staff are employed in the aid industry in South Sudan, including in UN agencies and international and national NGOs, alongside 2,600 foreigners (Mednick, 2019). This is in a population of 12.5 million, 76% of whom were projected to be in need of humanitarian assistance in 2023, and 64% of whom – eight million people – were facing severe food insecurity (UN OCHA, 2022c). Craze writes, in an article for the New Humanitarian, that, “as South Sudan’s private sector has collapsed and the government has almost totally withdrawn from being a provider of wages, aid agency employment has become the locus for young people’s dreams” (Craze, 2021: n.p., emphasis in original).

This has deepened contestation for NGO jobs. Educated youth respondents in Diing et al.’s research reflected a “widely held frustration linked to employment seeking in the aid business, due to inaccessibility, elitism, nepotism and corruption in the human resources departments” (Diing et al., 2021: 46). Women with secondary or higher education, across their field sites, noted that employment with NGOs, the UN or private sector came with significant financial benefits and personal freedoms, but that accessing this work came with the risk of sexual harassment or sexual exploitation (ibid). Around the time of my research, there were growing protests in different parts of the country around access to and distribution of UN and NGO employment, with youth groups and unions demanding greater hiring of staff from local areas (see, e.g., Radio Tamazuj, 2021; Sudans Post, 2021; UNMISS, 2021; Woja, 2021). These protests led, in some cases, to violence, and to the evacuation of aid workers and suspension of services (Craze, 2021). These protests reflect deep inequalities in South Sudan, the marginalisation and alienation felt by many young people, and the pressures of widespread unemployment.

In a context of profound economic scarcity, NGOs (both international and national) have thus attained new importance, in a deeply ambivalent way. As one interviewee, the director of a large national NGO, argued,

*In South Sudan now, the only industry where there is cash flow, I would say, is in the humanitarian industry. The government structures have collapsed. The private sector is not functioning because the economy has also collapsed. So business is not booming, business is done by a few people. And the money is not in circulation. So, the only sector now is this one.*⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Interview, 12 November 2021 (a)

In other words, as Thomas writes (2018:31), conflict and economic crisis have placed professional, foreign-funded NGOs “*at the centre of the circuits of hard currency in rural South Sudan*”, controlling most of the circulation of dollars outside Juba. In the context of the processes of marketisation and monetisation described above, this places them in a distinctive, powerful, economic position. This, in turn, has “*changed the social position of NGOs and NGO staff significantly*” (ibid: 41).⁶⁶

5.3. Narratives of learning and changing aspirations

The gulf in the value of salaries between NGOs and the government is a major driver of the growing aspirations for NGO employment. Interlocutors’ accounts, however, frequently centred ideas of learning, personal growth and professional development in their reflections on the desirability of NGO employment, as well as in their explanations of their decision-making about movement between different organisations and sectors. For example, numerous interlocutors had moved back and forth between civil service roles in the government and NGO work both during the CPA interim period, and since independence. They often pointed to differences not just in salary, but also to a desire for learning and for new challenges, and to perceptions about the prospects for creating change in and through either sphere. One interviewee, for example, had worked in a government ministry at the national level for around two years after the CPA, before leaving for a role in an international NGO. There were, he says, “*many factors*” influencing his move:

*One, the work by that time within the government sector was not challenging really. So I really needed to enrol where really, I can utilize my skills, my knowledge to the fullest, while also allowing me to grow professionally... But also the NGO was paying well, compared to government.*⁶⁷

Similar narratives of learning and professional growth were also common amongst interlocutors who had moved more recently from government positions to NGO work. Another interviewee, a former government employee and the founder of a recently formed, sub-national organisation, reflected, for example, that, “*while I’m doing this work, it is like I am in a class learning... every day you*

⁶⁶ As one example of this, at the time of my research, NGOs sometimes physically carried dollars from Juba to other parts of the country to pay salaries. Interviewees in Ganyiel, for example, described how their salaries arrived physically, in dollars, when the UN helicopter came. Carver (2020) describes a similar situation in Akobo, a town on South Sudan’s border with Ethiopia which became a hub for aid operations in rebel-held areas after 2013, where aid dollars have provided jobs and stimulated the local economy; one INGO reported bringing over 50,000 USD to Akobo every month, in cash, to pay salaries.

⁶⁷ Interview, 8 December 2021

learn new things. Tomorrow, you will learn another new thing. That is exactly how I'm feeling. The way I was before, is not the same as the way I am now.'⁶⁸ A third, a man who had worked for the local government for several years, before resigning to take up a largely voluntary role with a national NGO, said that he had decided to leave his government role for NGO work, because, in his words,

*In life, it is good that one is not to be stagnant or not to be in one place. Because in this environment, we need to learn, we need to grow in different sectors, to have very many experiences in different fields. So, that's what made me decide that I need to learn more, I want to be knowledgeable... And then also, you know, in this current situation, we need to be like having many experiences, to learn more ideas, so one can also build up the nation.*⁶⁹

These accounts reflect, in part, the demand for flexibility and the pressure on individuals to continually retool and retrain in contemporary neoliberal societies (Freeman, 2012), and the related neoliberal emphasis on self-realisation and self-governance (Roth, 2015b), discussed further below. They also point to the growing prestige of NGO work and to the opportunities this work offers, and to a shift in what people want to learn towards skills that meet the needs of the NGO sector. Another interviewee, the co-founder of a small, sub-national NGO, argued, for example,

*Even our fathers, our mothers, that have been working in government for long, they're not getting that skills that we are having now. The mind that we have is different from theirs. ... For example, management skills, especially managing organisation, is unique. Proposal writing, previously, they're not writing proposals. For them, for example, working in government, they have all already the forms that they fill. But for organisation, you need to create, and then develop, by yourself, and then it continues.*⁷⁰

The director of one mid-sized, Juba-based NGO explained that he had encouraged his children to try and begin their careers in NGOs, even if they later move elsewhere, because *"they will get more skill from there, they will learn a lot, they will also be moved to meet with so many people"*.⁷¹ In NGOs, he said, they would receive training, attend meetings, and gain experience, including in proposal writing and reporting. It would also enable them to talk to many people, build relationships, and

⁶⁸ Interview, 7 November 2021 (a)

⁶⁹ Interview, 18 August 2019 (c)

⁷⁰ Interview, 26 November 2021 (b)

⁷¹ Interview, 15 November 2021 (a)

to become well-known. This notion of becoming 'known' through NGO work was also relatively common.

Particularly at more senior levels, interviewees emphasised exposure, through NGO work, to different people and cultures, within and beyond South Sudan, also offering opportunities for learning, and to gain influence. One interlocutor, for example, a man who had worked for international and national NGOs before founding a small, Juba-based NGO, said that NGO work meant learning about *"how you can also connect with the outside world, not your small islands, where you were born in that small island, and you need to grow grey hair in that island"*. NGO work, he said, had also *"pushed us to meet with the people at the higher level, even international community, like the diplomatic mission in South Sudan"*.⁷² Others similarly emphasised the benefits they gained through NGO work as including exposure to international fora, for advocacy, connections and ideas; in the words of one woman, a former government employee and now NGO director: *"for all the challenges I get, I still feel this [NGO work] is the right place, maybe because of the services we do to the communities... and with the exposure and international travel, that gives me an opportunity to speak our issues, not from the third party but personally."*⁷³

Others pointed out that not only had government salaries collapsed, so, too, had government budgets. Those seeking to provide services to people in South Sudan, for example, often saw NGOs as a better prospect than government, as noted in the previous chapter. One young man working for a national NGO argued, for example, *"I'm afraid to say the government has failed. The ministries are not working. Sometimes they're not paying staffs. Yeah, so my experience with the NGO, literally the NGOs really do work that the ministries are supposed to do."*⁷⁴ Each of these examples indicates a shift in professional identities and aspirations away from government work and towards NGOs, and points to the growing prestige and desirability of NGO employment in the context of South Sudan's changing political economy, with implications for the kinds of skills and knowledge that are valued.

5.4. Sharing salaries: between self-development and social obligation

As the above discussion shows, NGO employment has attained new importance in South Sudan's monetising and marketising economy. This, however, is not a straightforward story of material benefits accruing to the individual or household, of individual accumulation, or of the

⁷² Interview, 25 October 2021 (a)

⁷³ Interview, 2 July 2019 (c)

⁷⁴ Interview, 21 November 2021 (c)

formation of a discrete, distinct middle class, ‘NGO elite’ or neo-comprador class standing apart from wider society, “*trading in domestic poverty for individual perks*” (Petras, 1999: 430). Rather, interlocutors’ accounts painted a more complex picture, in which the benefits of NGO employment are shared amongst wider networks and bound up with varied forms of social obligation, and NGO salaries are integrated into the survival strategies of extended networks of family. My aim is not to romanticise this sharing of salaries, which can place a considerable burden on individuals, as well as increasing inequalities between those families and communities that do and do not have members working in NGOs; but rather to point to the ways in which this complicates notions of class, and to the entanglement of NGOs with social networks and support systems, far beyond and aside from their funded projects and programmes. All this is important to understanding the role of NGOs, NGO employment and NGO salaries in South Sudan.

Across South Sudan, there are strong social and legal norms and obligations that promote sharing across social networks, including during times of hunger and famine (Harragin & Chol, 1999; Humphrey et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Pendle, 2023; Santschi et al., 2018). These norms operate particularly amongst kin, with stronger obligations of mutual support amongst those with closer kinship ties, though resources are also shared with more distant relatives, as well as neighbours, friends and others (Santschi et al., 2018; see also Humphrey et al., 2019). These norms and obligations are integral to coping strategies in South Sudan; they can be an important part of how people survive crises, with people typically relying far more on support shared across social networks than on external aid (Kim et al., 2020; Santschi et al., 2018). Pendle, for example, has shown how, in parts of South Sudan, chiefs’ courts have enforced social norms demanding sharing across social networks, including the redistribution of food to those in need, and, in doing so, have provided a social safety net against extreme hunger. At the same time, the court rulings “*deflected the blame for hunger away from the systems and people that cause it, instead placing the social and legal blame for hunger on those with little political or economic power, especially the families of the most vulnerable*” (Pendle, 2023: 471).

The specificities of these norms and practices vary in different parts of the country, and amongst different groups, and there are different mechanisms to enforce the sharing of wealth (Santschi et al., 2018). Obligations of sharing and mutual support apply to an array of different resources, including land, labour, food and livestock, amongst other things, as well as assets associated with the market economy, such as salaries (ibid). Aid, including food aid and cash assistance, is also

often shared (Kim et al., 2020; Santschi et al., 2018). The sharing of support between social connections has, in South Sudan, played a role in helping people cope with and recover from crises (Humphrey et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2020). At the same time, not everyone is socially connected to the same extent, and people can also be excluded from these same systems, compounding their vulnerability (Kim et al., 2020; Pendle, 2023). In addition, in some cases, social obligations can become overwhelming, obliging people to provide support beyond their means in order to avoid the risk of exclusion from social support networks (Kim et al., 2020). In the context of South Sudan's economic crisis, the South Sudanese staff of NGOs and international organisations are under tremendous pressure to share resources with relatives and community members in need (Santschi et al., 2018).

Interviewees with paid roles in NGOs were almost always supporting extended networks of kin. This was the case for interviewees in different parts of the country, in different roles within organisations and with family in different locations. The interviewee quoted in the previous section, who had previously worked as a civil servant, was, by the time we first met, working in a relatively senior role in the local office of a national NGO. Like many other interviewees, he had been displaced as a child during the second Sudanese civil war, which meant he received an education outside southern Sudan. He became the first member of his family to complete secondary school, and then, later, a degree, and was now the only member of his extended family with an NGO job. If you have a good job at an NGO, he says, *"everyone is knocking at your door"*. He supported members of his extended family who needed food or medical treatment, as well as hosting several younger members of his family in his compound in the town and helping them to attend school. He had been working for the organisation for some time and had hoped to make improvements to his home, but has been unable to do so; he lamented, *"I cannot afford construction or anything, because every time our money goes for all these things, school fees, feeding, South Sudan economy is down, everything is expensive, the little we have here may not be all that enough."*⁷⁵ Nonetheless, he says, *"this is the situation, we have nowhere to run, I know most of these families of mine they are not having a job, and they are just looking at me."* If he refused to help, it would be like he was 'rebelling', and would reflect badly on his family. Instead, he says, *"I have to take the responsibility. You find yourself you are overwhelmed with a lot of things, trying to solve everything."* Nonetheless, he says, *"this is the little I can do. I have been helped and I need also to pay."* However, the organisation received funds intermittently, and payments from international organisations were often delayed, or disbursed on a pre-financing basis. As a result, his salary, too, was intermittent. When we met again in 2021, he had not been

⁷⁵ Interview, 26 February 2020

paid for some time, and reflects, *“it is a strain... we are not getting for some months, and you enter into debts, when you get [your salary], you are trying to put back the debts, and all these things.”*⁷⁶

Another interviewee, the director of a small NGO in Juba, was supporting an extended family of more than 30 people in a refugee settlement in northern Uganda, noting, *“I am the only one taking care of them. Because there is no other person who actually can get something in this situation of, a town life situation like here, if you are not working, it is a nightmare for you to support any family member.”*⁷⁷ A local staff member of a national NGO described how his salary arrived, physically, by UN helicopter; he explained, simply, *“here, this money are a means of survival, so we will share it. When the salary is received, we use some for food. If you have one of your relatives who is at school, you pay his school fees or her school fees.”*⁷⁸ Another interviewee from the area, also working for a national NGO, argued, more broadly that *“the presence of NGO can improve economic hardships in the community.”* He elaborated that, *“even in this time of crisis, the employees working with NGOs are really doing a lot, not only to their immediate relatives but also to the entire community... like myself, if you go to my house in the evening you can find a lot of people benefiting directly, they are staying there, because when I have food I cannot eat it alone.”*⁷⁹

For many interlocutors, particularly those engaged in smaller NGOs or in more junior positions, meeting the needs of their immediate families, and responding to requests from wider families and friends, quickly absorbed all their salary, making it very hard to save, to invest in further study or to develop one's home, as in the example above. In a conversation that resonated with many others, an interlocutor in Wau, a man who had previously worked for a national NGO, and now worked for an international NGO, emphasised his inability to save anything from his salary, commenting, *“when you think of planning, you could die without achieving your target... If you are working, there are a lot of family members to support.”* He explained,

When I get my salary, I have three brothers and my sister and then I have the uncles and my cousins. Because of my finance being too limited, I cannot manage to extend my hands to the uncles and the cousins and the aunties unless the situation is severe... for now, I help my brothers and my sister, I do monitoring who is in dire need this month than the other one, that is who I help.

⁷⁶ Interview, 2 December 2021

⁷⁷ Interview, 25 October 2021 (a)

⁷⁸ Interview, 24 July 2019

⁷⁹ Interview, 26 August 2019 (a)

*[...] People who save must be earning like 2000 dollars a month or 1500 at least, to that extent you can save. What you need to meet first is the basic need of your relatives, for medication and food, if there is no food in your brother or sister's house, you must meet it. And if your money is little, it cannot accumulate, it just comes and goes.*⁸⁰

This account points to the tenuousness of prosperity gained through NGO employment, particularly for those in more junior, lower-paid positions, or in smaller, less well-funded organisations. With many people to support, for those with lower salaries, money ‘cannot accumulate, it just comes and goes’; aspirations to pursue further education, or develop one’s home, for example, are hard to achieve. Another interviewee, for example, was the only one of his siblings to have completed secondary school, and to have a job. He had long hoped to return to studying, and to complete a degree. However, he explains,

I have worked for several NGOs. If I had saved the money, it would have taken me to school [for further studies]. But because of the burdening I have with the family, we are seven, by the way in South Sudan cultures vary, according to our culture, you cannot survive, you cannot beat your home, and the rest of the family are suffering.

He is supporting several of his siblings’ children to complete primary and secondary school, in the hope that in the future, *“in our family we will be three, four people who are educated, maybe the young ones will not suffer like me”*.⁸¹

In this way, interlocutors often conveyed a sense of moral obligation, referencing ideas about moral and immoral behaviour. Interviewees also often reflected a desire to reciprocate, in some way, the help that they themselves had received; a sense, as above, that they ‘had been helped’ and thus also had to pay. Supporting the education of family members could also be a way of ensuring future support for the wider family: interviewees often expressed a hope that, in the future, more members of their family would be able to secure paid jobs and the burden on them as individuals would be reduced; and that these younger family members might, in turn, support them in the future.

⁸⁰ Interview, 21 June 2019 (b)

⁸¹ Interview, 25 July 2019

In addition to the sense of moral obligation, the sharing of salaries was also a way to strengthen social relationships and social standing. One man, who had previously worked for international and national NGOs but who was not currently employed by either, argued that working for an NGO, “*brings a good relationship... it brings more people to you. Like now, everybody has interest to come and talk to me. And everybody has interest to ask me what they need.*” He continued, “*if you are working with NGO, on 28th of month, you will receive a call from your relatives, that have you received your salaries? Then you say yes. They say yes, where is for my tea? You see, everyone will ask you like that. So, it is good, it builds relationships with many people.*”⁸² Another interlocuter in the same area, working for a sub-nationally based NGO, said that through sharing his salary, he had been able to “*build confidence between the community and the family*”.⁸³ The ability to support others, to pay for the education of relatives and respond to the requests of people in need, are a demonstration of social standing, and an enactment of moral worth (Green, 2021).

Conversely, failure to support others who were struggling, if you yourself had or were perceived to have the means to help, could bring shame to or conflict within one’s family, and lead to allegations of ‘selfishness’. As one interviewee, the director of a relatively well-established, Juba-based NGO, explained, “*some of us who are working in NGOs, our relatives, friends, and people who are depending on us, think we have a lot of money. And we should be giving this money, every time we meet them or every time they come, they have a need, they don’t expect you to say no, I don’t have money.*” As a result, he says, “*most of the time, they label you as people who are selfish, who do not want to support and contribute to social gatherings... who are very mean, they don’t want to give, and they have a lot of money, so that is one big problem that we are not able to solve.*”⁸⁴

Another interviewee, a local staff member working for a national NGO, explained that, whenever his salary arrived, he shared it with his family:

We believe in sharing. For example, myself, I did not make it on my own, getting education... it was through other people's hard work like my brothers. So, they were able to do that for me, so why shouldn't I do it, and pay them back, by sharing what I have with the family... When you get something, you also support other people. What I get, I share it. It is not enough, but I have to share it, because nobody else is doing it.

⁸² Interview, 5 December 2021

⁸³ Interview, 3 December 2021 (b)

⁸⁴ Interview, 21 March 2020

Crucially, like many interlocutors who were working for, or indeed running, South Sudanese NGOs, his salary was low, intermittent and often delayed, making it difficult to meet the needs of his wider family, and leading, often, to expectations that could not be met. As he explained, there are those *“who may not understand, they think you have a lot of things that you are not giving them”*. The risk comes, he says, with *“those who are far from me, who are relatives, and they request something, I would say now I don't have anything in hand, so they will think I am denying them something to support themselves... maybe they will cut line with you, they think you are selfish and you are not helping them, so, but it is not the case, it is only that it is not enough. Because they are far, they don't see what you are going through. ... they will hear you are working, and you are not giving them anything.”*

He also emphasised the importance of ensuring that, if you get a job, you do not begin to behave differently: becoming rude, distancing yourself from others and behaving as if you are more important than them. This was crucial, he argued, if, like him, you were living and working within your own community. For him this means, amongst other things, continuing to contribute labour to community activities – he helps building dykes, cultivating, fishing and farming, so people will not see him as someone who *“went outside and acquired education”*, but rather as someone who still does community work. He tries to show that he is still *“for this community”*, not just *“for organisation”*. In part, this is because NGO work is often temporary: *“if I put myself in a very big position... where will I fit if I don't have a job?”* Furthermore, he points out, he lives in an area in which there have been numerous instances of violence against aid workers; people have been targeted, he says, because *“there are those who think we have a lot of money”*.⁸⁵ For this reason, too, he says, you must not start behaving as if you are ‘more important’ than other people. When you do not live in a gated compound, behind a barbed wire fence, relationships with those around you are a crucial part of staying safe.

As this and other similar accounts highlight, the gap between perceptions of NGO workers as wealthy and a relatively precarious reality could create significant pressures, including expectations that could not be met. Interlocutors had to navigate this carefully, particularly if they were living and working in their home areas. This also speaks to a crucial, broader point: unlike international aid workers living in ‘bubbles’, or in gated, securitised compounds (c.f. Collinson & Duffield, 2013; Duffield, 2010), managing expectations and maintaining relationships was important both for their longer-term social connections and positions within social networks, and for their own safety. In addition, as the accounts above also highlight,

⁸⁵ Interview, 18 September 2022

contracts with NGOs are typically short-term and intermittent, and future work is not guaranteed; people may find themselves calling on these same social support networks in future. As Santschi et al. (2018: 7) confirm, those who do not share resources may be accused of selfishness, or ‘eating alone’, possibly risking social isolation; and *“where kinship networks are of pivotal social, economic, political and security importance, social isolation has serious long-term consequences”*.

Importantly, social and moral norms are not static, but rather are open to contestation and negotiation, and are continually being made and remade. Durham (2020), for example, explores how, in Botswana, long-standing tensions and moral dilemmas between self-development and social connection, or between selfishness and sociality, have been ‘sharpened’ in the context of growing wealth, and a rapidly expanding consumer economy. In South Sudan, where some people have accrued significant wealth while others are struggling to survive, the continuing salience of moral, social and legal norms and obligations are being actively worked out. The responsibility of wealthier members of families and communities to others, as well as the extent to which property and wealth accrues to individuals or families, are being explored and debated, sometimes through courts (Pendle, 2023), and even political and military elites remain entangled, in varying ways, with local social, moral and legal registers of accountability (Pendle, 2021). Allegations of selfishness may reflect the navigation, assertion or (re)making of moral boundaries in a time of growing inequality, as well as the efforts of wider families to make claims on NGO salaries in a context of profound cash-scarcity. NGO employees are themselves, in turn, navigating different pressures, social obligations and moral imperatives in a context of rapid social and economic change.

It is also important to emphasise that there is a huge amount of variation within the aid industry in terms of salaries, including the amount and regularity of wages, and that interviewees were a heterogeneous group, in highly varied positions. Some interlocutors had been able to save; they had bought land, paid for further degrees and established businesses that they hoped would give them greater security if NGO work dried up. Some explained that NGO work had enabled them to get married and build their homes. Some had spouses and siblings also working in the aid industry; they had a relatively regular income, owned businesses, and sent their children to private schools in neighbouring countries. Many different interlocutors emphasised the challenge of responding to requests for support from relatives, given the severity of South Sudan’s economic crisis, but these pressures were felt to different extents by different people, and people also, of course, responded to these requests in different ways.

Unsurprisingly, those who were the only member of their extended family with a higher-level education, or working in an NGO, were generally in a far more precarious position than those from better-off families, with several members engaged in waged employment. It was in the former cases, particularly, that interviewees emphasised that they could not afford to save, or to study further. This placed them at a disadvantage relative to those whose salaries were enabling them to pursue undergraduate and master's degrees. As the aid industry in South Sudan becomes ever more competitive, it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure work without these higher-level qualifications, as discussed in the next section.

5.5. Accessing NGO work

As the above discussions show, NGO employment is highly sought-after. The question stemming from this, given the contestation over NGO employment, is who can access this, and how? Interviewees had highly varied personal histories and routes into NGO employment. However, I point here to two factors that appear particularly key in determining access to much sought-after NGO jobs, each of them linked to dynamics of inequality in South Sudan: linguistic capital, and formal education.

5.5.1. Language

Language plays a major role in shaping access to NGO employment, with NGOs and UN agencies favouring those fluent and literate in English. Although the language spoken day-to-day in national NGO offices varies, English is the primary working language of the aid industry in South Sudan: for example, it is generally the language of inter-agency meetings, project proposals and reporting. Those who were educated in other languages – including in Arabic in northern Sudan, or in southern Sudan prior to the change in the language of instruction to English – often find themselves at a disadvantage. Several interlocutors in this position had taken explicit steps to improve their English, taking English courses after completing bachelor's degrees in Arabic, for example, or studying for further qualifications in English. One man explained, for example, that his wife had an undergraduate degree in rural development from a university in Khartoum, but was struggling to get a job because NGO work requires English; she had enrolled in classes at a university in South Sudan to improve.

This is the case not only for those seeking employment, but also for organisations seeking resources. One interlocutor, for example, explained how she had been elected the leader of a women's union because she was able to speak English. She had been actively sought out and

asked to stand in the election. The other members, she said, *“are from the Arabic patterns that came from Khartoum, so working with other stakeholders and partners is always very hard. So, they have no-one to mobilize resources, their opportunities are not being represented well, even if someone comes to Juba, they don’t even go back with information because... they did not hear anything in the workshop”*.⁸⁶ Another interviewee, the director of a small sub-national, membership-based organisation, explained that they were planning a leadership transition to another member of their team. However, the intended future director could not yet take over the role because she studied in Arabic, and so the language barrier would be a challenge; in preparation, she was studying for a Diploma in Accounting, primarily to improve her English.⁸⁷ Both examples point to the differential opportunities available to those who do and do not speak English, and to the significant pressure for those who studied in other languages to improve their English skills in order to advance within NGOs; including, in these cases, the role of English in shaping access to leadership positions even within South Sudanese community-based organisations.

Interlocutors almost always spoke several different languages: typically English, Arabic and at least one of South Sudan’s many languages. Without English, however, accessing employment in international organisations and, to a lesser extent, South Sudanese NGOs, was very difficult; and, similarly, for South Sudanese organisations, accessing the resources of the international humanitarian system was very difficult without staff comfortable in English. In this way, inequalities and exclusions are reproduced, including in relation to recruitment into and advancement within the aid industry, and in terms of which South Sudanese organisations are able to access the resources of the humanitarian industry. More broadly than in South Sudan, other authors have similarly highlighted how the hegemony of English and French in the aid industry replicates neo-colonial power dynamics (Vitantonio, 2022), and have pointed to the role of linguistic capital (particularly command of English) – in combination with other factors – in structuring hierarchies in aid encounters, including opportunities for employment and promotion within aid organisations (Roth, 2019).

At the same time, Roth (2019: 44) suggests that for national staff in international aid organisations, linguistic capital is *“more valuable than academic credentials and job experience”*, and that language skills could provide national staff with job opportunities (Roth: 2015b). My own data suggests that this used to be the case in South Sudan, but that academic qualifications and

⁸⁶ Interview, 4 November 2021

⁸⁷ Interview, 3 December 2021 (a)

experience are becoming increasingly important as the aid sector becomes more competitive, with command of English often necessary but no longer sufficient for entry into the aid industry, as discussed next.

5.5.2. Formal education

Interviewees were an immensely varied group in many respects. They came from many different parts of the country, from different ethnic groups, and from a wide range of family backgrounds. All, however, had completed at least formal secondary education, which places them in a small minority in South Sudan, where gross secondary school enrolment was around 11% in 2015 (UNESCO, n.d.), and net secondary enrolment was estimated at 5.2% in 2023 (UNICEF & UNESCO, 2023). South Sudan has only around 400 secondary schools, almost all of which are in urban areas (Haider, 2021). Almost all interviewees also had some form of tertiary education. Around two thirds of interviewees had a bachelor's degree or higher; 20 had at least one master's degree. Several had or were pursuing a PhD or medical degree.

Access to NGO employment in South Sudan is heavily predicated on formal educational qualifications, and as the NGO arena becomes increasingly competitive, the level of qualification required to access these jobs also appears to be increasing. Educational provision in South Sudan is profoundly unequal, and the reliance on formal, higher level educational qualifications in dictating access to NGO employment in this context means that many are excluded. This is a central way in which NGOs and NGO employment are bound up with inequality in South Sudan.

Formal education in South Sudan has a distinct history and cultural meaning, and has long been associated with governmental power (Pendle, 2021). In the first colonial period, early education systems were meant to reproduce a system of coercion, *“training soldiers or officials to help maintain the system of foreign domination”* (Duany et al., 2021: 8), and this coercion was replicated under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium. Demand for formal education grew towards the end of the colonial period, *“as people realised that education provided them with a means to negotiate with a government whose armies they were not able to defeat”* (ibid: 9). After independence, the relationship between education and government was reinforced, as those with a formal education gained positions in the government in Khartoum, and later the SPLA (Pendle, 2021).

During the period of the second Sudanese civil war (1983-2005), educational systems were militarised and fragmented, but demand for education continued to grow, and statistics suggest that primary school enrolment accelerated (Duany et al., 2021). Aspirations for education were often bound up with military recruitment: in northern Sudan, young men attending formal or informal schools were conscripted into the army, while in southern Sudan, the SPLA and other armed movements often used the promise of education as a recruiting tool, with young people joining these groups in the hope of accessing education (Duany et al., 2021). Many of those who were displaced from South Sudan received a formal education in the refugee camps of Kenya and Uganda (Pendle, 2021). People also saw formal education as a way of dealing with the massive displacement and devastation of the wars (Aquila, 2021). As a result of war and displacement, basic education became available to many more people, and education was no longer “*a marker of elite distinction in itself*” (Pendle, 2021: 354).

After the CPA, large-scale returns to South Sudan, urbanisation and monetisation, all helped further drive demand for education (Duany et al., 2021). Civil service and NGO jobs demanded a level of formal education (Pendle, 2021); educational aspirations changed in tandem with monetisation, as people “*people began to believe that modern education was necessary to survive the new money economy*” (Aquila, 2021: 49). New schools and universities were built, and enrolment increased (Duany et al., 2021). Even prior to the outbreak of widespread conflict in 2013, however, the number of students in primary education was declining (Novelli et al., 2016), and the conflict further undermined gains that had been made (Moro & Tolani, 2021).

Today, demand for formal education in South Sudan is high, but there are huge inequalities in access to, quality of, and outcomes from education, between and within states, and along the lines of gender, rurality, and class (Novelli et al., 2016). The wealthy send their children to private schools, in South Sudan or neighbouring countries, while poor families and young people go to great lengths to pay school fees, and other associated costs of formal schooling (Aquila, 2021; Diing et al., 2021; Kindersley & Majok, 2022). In 2018, one third of primary schools and over half of secondary schools in South Sudan were private (Duany et al., 2021). Differential access to education (and, in turn, to waged employment) is a major driver of deepening inequality in South Sudan (Daoust, 2018; Diing et al., 2021; Novelli et al., 2016). Inequalities are particularly stark between urban and rural areas, and between richer and poorer families. In 2008-9, around 58% of primary-aged children in rural areas were out of school, compared to 27% in urban areas, and the literacy rate was 22% in rural areas and 53% in urban areas (Novelli et al., 2016). These

differences may now be even greater, since many rural primary schools collapsed with South Sudan's conflict and economic crisis (Diing et al., 2021). There are significant regional disparities: the probability of completing grade eight ranges from 25-43% in Western and Central Equatoria and Upper Nile States, to 11-20% in Lakes, Jonglei, Warrap and Eastern Equatoria (Haider, 2021; Novelli et al., 2016). Gendered inequalities are significant, and increase with each level of education: in 2009, for example, girls made up 37% of enrolments in primary school, 27% in secondary school and 24% in higher education (World Bank, 2012).

There is a perception that the quality of education is better in neighbouring countries, and that potential employers, including the government, UN agencies and NGOs, favour those with secondary and post-secondary qualifications from outside South Sudan (Haider, 2021; Novelli et al., 2016). Those that can afford to do so often send their children outside the country for education (Novelli et al., 2016). As one interlocutor reflected,

*I spent the whole of my education from primary up to secondary in South Sudan... for those who have no fathers to support them, they just remain, but for those who have their fathers having resources, they send them to Kenya and Uganda and other parts of East Africa. So, I was feeling I was very, very unlucky.*⁸⁸

Interlocutors had varied, idiosyncratic educational trajectories. Most were of a generation that had grown up during Sudan's 22-year civil war, a period described by Sommers (2005) as a 'relentless educational catastrophe'. A small minority had studied from primary school through to university in Uganda or Kenya with relatively little disruption; these were often the children of senior SPLM/SPLA officials, or of the small number of South Sudanese individuals employed in aid agencies in the 1990s and 2000s. Most, however, had gone to significant lengths to access education, and had complex educational trajectories, taking place across several different locations and funded by a patchwork of different sources. A considerable number had been recruited into the SPLA as children, and had begun studying in the SPLA training camps in Ethiopia. They, and others, later travelled to refugee camps in Kenya and Uganda in search of further study, or to northern Sudan. They were often the first amongst their families to have been to school. Many had worked to fund their studies, and had had contributions from families who made significant sacrifices to facilitate their education. In several cases, interlocutors' education had been sponsored by churches or international NGOs. Educational trajectories also varied in different parts of the country, often mapping onto different experiences of

⁸⁸ Interview, 25 November 2021 (b)

displacement, and women often emphasised the heightened challenges they faced in accessing education because of their gender.

Some interlocutors had begun working for NGOs when they had only completed primary or secondary education. This was more common amongst those who began working for aid agencies in the 1990s or 2000s, when the ability to speak English, and to translate and intermediate between expatriate staff and people living in the area of intervention, could be enough to secure employment, or at least to gain unpaid experience with NGOs that later became paid work. One young man in Wau explained, for example, how, in the mid-2000s, *“I started working with NGOs when I was still a teacher in my village. By that time, you can hardly find people who read and write. So, most NGOs were much relying on me, like working for them on voluntary basis in the village.”*⁸⁹ He participated in several training courses, organised by NGOs, and was later supported by an NGO to complete a diploma. He went on to work for several NGOs and is now the director of a small sub-nationally based organisation. Another interviewee, a woman running a small organisation in the capital, explained how, in the 1990s, she had managed to convince her parents to allow her to go to school, where she began learning English. When an international NGO began working with pregnant women in the area, they needed a woman to act as translator; she was very young, but, she says, *“I was intelligent, I knew how to speak and to communicate”*.⁹⁰ She began working for them, using the money to set up a small business which later enabled her to continue her studies. A third interviewee worked for an international NGO, and was their most senior staff member in their local office, in his hometown. He had completed primary and secondary education in South Sudan and Kenya during the second civil war. He returned to South Sudan after the CPA, where he worked for a local NGO, then for an international NGO, where he was promoted several times until he reached his current position. He explained, *“It is a very big position, I think the role only privileges the work experience, that is why I get it. There are some people with degrees working with me, but they are under me. ... [But] I have the context, and the knowledge.”*⁹¹

Interviewees had often used their salaries to fund further education, or had been supported to complete higher-level qualifications by their employers. As one man explained, you become *“used to kind of work, school, work, school”*.⁹² Taking time off work for education was a luxury many could

⁸⁹ Interview, 1 December 2021 (c)

⁹⁰ Interview, 4 November 2021

⁹¹ Interview, 30 July 2019 (a)

not afford, and so remote or part-time degrees were a popular choice. Others, however, as indicated above, have been unable to afford further study. Often, they were finding it increasingly difficult to continue securing employment in a hyper-competitive industry, in which they were competing with growing numbers of university graduates.

More broadly, as NGO work becomes more competitive in South Sudan, and as there are growing numbers of university graduates looking for jobs, breaking into the aid industry without higher-level qualifications, such as diplomas and degrees, is becoming more and more difficult. A scan of job adverts posted on the South Sudan NGO Forum website⁹³ for a variety of roles in international and national NGOs suggests most require a higher-level degree and multiple years of work experience, even, in some cases, for voluntary positions. For example, one recently posted advert recruiting volunteer project officers for a national NGO, a one-year post, listed a diploma or bachelor's degree as required and 2-5 years' work experience as desirable. Another national NGO was seeking voluntary project officers, a six-month renewable position, with a list of 18 responsibilities that include attending cluster meetings, arranging field assessments, and researching proposals and partnership requests. The role requires a diploma, undergraduate or master's degree in a relevant field, and at least two years' experience. A third advert, posted by a national NGO, requests volunteer project officers for six states, a one-year unpaid position requiring a diploma or bachelor's degree.⁹⁴

Almost everyone I spoke to was either currently studying, or had aspirations for further study.⁹⁵ This was often driven, at least in part, by a desire to ensure one could still compete for NGO jobs. One interviewee, a man with a bachelor's degree in law, explained that he wanted to do a second bachelor's degree, this time in organisational management, and hopefully a master's after that, in order to build his CV. Those with secondary school qualifications were looking for opportunities for diplomas or undergraduate degrees; those with undergraduate degrees aspired to complete a master's, those with master's degrees were often hoping to begin a PhD. However, scholarships are very hard to access (and, some interlocutors suggested, based on connections),

⁹³ <https://comms.southsudanngoforum.org/c/jobs/5>

⁹⁴ These voluntary positions that focus primarily on establishing or maintaining an organisation's presence in a particular area are shaped, in part, by the incentives for an organisation to establish a visible, if shallow, presence in multiple parts of the country in order to be eligible for funding.

⁹⁵ Several sources point to growing demand for, and enrolment in, tertiary education in South Sudan; see Akec, 2021; Kuyok, 2017. In 2011, there were around 39,000 students enrolled in higher education institutions in South Sudan (Akec, 2021). Many others study in universities in neighbouring countries, where the standard of higher education is perceived to be higher (Kuany, 2016). There were an estimated 9,000 South Sudanese students studying in Sudan prior to the outbreak of conflict there in 2023, for example (Kuyok, 2023).

and so funding degrees is a problem for many. Several had had to stop studying part-way through their degrees because of a lack of funds, and had been unable to resume.

In addition, there is some evidence of a shift in what people are choosing to study. While qualifications in social work, teaching and theology were common amongst the older generation, growing numbers of younger graduates have studied for higher-level qualifications that are specifically targeted towards the NGO sector. Certificates, diplomas and degrees in project management, monitoring and evaluation, human resources, procurement and logistics, or supply chain management, for example, all appear increasingly common, alongside various incarnations of development studies, and bachelor's or master's degrees in business administration. Many had also completed numerous short courses, in various subjects. In this emphasis on the constant acquisition of further qualifications, as well as the shift towards qualifications oriented towards the NGO sector, interlocutors' accounts reflect Freeman's assertion that the

neoliberal mandate for flexibility in all realms of life—the capacity to constantly retool, retrain, and respond to the shifting tides of the global marketplace, the expectation that individuals will become “entrepreneurs of the self”—has come to embody many facets of middle-class experience within the global economy (Freeman, 2012: 85).

The expectation that individuals will become ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ is also reflected in the emphasis on learning and gaining experience through NGO work, as described above.

It is also worth noting that several South Sudanese NGOs were supporting staff to study while working, including sometimes helping to fund their qualifications. The director of one national NGO explained, for example, that if they have someone whose “*education is a bit low, but has a zeal to do work*”, they would support them to study while working. He explains, “*we train people on job, we send them to school, they do the semester, then when the school is closed... they come back, then do the work, then they go back to school.*” They have trained 27 staff in this way, some of whom have subsequently been able to graduate with degrees, diplomas and secondary school certificates. The organisation contributed to the cost, though did not pay in full. This, he says, has “*served the organisation well, because even the turnover of the staff is very minimal*”.⁹⁶ Another director similarly explained, “*we have already supported so many students in school, those who have already completed masters, those who have already completed their undergraduate... once they finish, they come back to support the*

⁹⁶ Interview, 10 November 2021 (c)

*organization.*⁹⁷ More broadly, South Sudanese NGOs were often seeking to hire locally, from within the area of intervention. This might mean prioritising applicants from the local area, even if they had relatively little NGO work experience, or fewer educational qualifications, relative to others, and providing them with training and support. This is one way in which interlocutors were seeking to navigate inequalities in access to education in their hiring practices.

Beyond language skills and formal qualifications, work experience was important in securing access to NGO employment. In several cases, individuals had worked for a considerable period of time as volunteers in the hope of securing future paid employment, either within the same organisation or in order to compete for paid roles in other organisations. One interviewee, for example, had worked for several years as a civil servant in a local government. After 2013, with salaries not being paid, she began looking for work elsewhere, eventually securing a job with a national NGO that was initiating a project in her local area. She received a salary for several months until the project ended. By the time of our interview, she had not been paid for some time, but she continued to work in the hope either that the organisation would gain new projects and that she would be paid again, or that she would get enough experience to secure a job elsewhere. In the meantime, she sustains herself and her family through farming. She persists with work in the NGO because, she says, “*the most important thing for me... I need to get experience. Normally in all the advertisements they say at least four years in the related field. Now, as I also want to continue working with the NGOs, I really need to bear with that situation, so that I get that experience.*”⁹⁸ In this and other cases, unpaid work – sometimes for considerable periods of time – is a way to gain experience, skills and connections for future NGO employment: a strategy that had been successful in some cases, but not in others.

The overall picture is of inflation of educational credentials, in which higher-level qualifications are increasingly required to secure access to NGO employment. The result is a deepening spiral of inequality, in which formal qualifications help facilitate access to NGO employment, and NGO salaries in turn can help pay for further education for oneself or one’s family. This association between NGO employment and formal, higher-level education is a central way in which inequalities – particularly along the lines of gender, rurality and class – are reflected in and reproduced through the NGO arena. It also reflects trends towards professionalisation and technicalisation within the aid industry, in which particular, often western, forms of knowledge

⁹⁷ Interview, 28 October 2021 (a)

⁹⁸ Interview, 20 August 2019

and expertise are privileged and validated (James, 2016; Kothari, 2005; Roth, 2012; Sundberg, 2019).

5.6. Conclusion

The above discussions highlight the central importance of NGO salaries to families and wider communities in a context of profound cash-scarcity and economic crisis. Both Santschi et al. (2018) and Craze (2021: n.p.) confirm the widespread sharing of NGO salaries; the latter describes them, for example, as a *“social security net for the extended families of those employed”*, and points to the *“centrality of aid agency wages to South Sudanese lives”*. This is inseparable from a wider context that includes the expansion of market systems and the commodification of land and labour, in which people have *“few alternatives other than to adopt market-based solutions for individual and household needs satisfaction, care, and wellbeing... as they navigate the gradual encroachment of capitalist relations in economic and social life”* (Nguyen et al., 2024).

In this context, NGO employment is increasingly central to hopes of upward mobility, and to aspirations for a better life for one’s immediate and extended family. NGOs, not necessarily through their projects and programmes but rather through their salaries, have become integral to the survival strategies of many South Sudanese individuals in a rapidly monetising economy. Büscher and Vlassenroot (2010: S264-S265) describe a similar trend in Goma, arguing that the expansion of the humanitarian sector in the town, combined with the weakening of the state, provoked a ‘swell’ of local NGOs, which became *“vital components of the survival strategies of urban inhabitants”*. Recognising this lends new importance to understanding the quality and distribution of aid agency employment (in UN agencies, and international and national NGOs) and of funding for South Sudanese NGOs, and how this relates to dynamics of inequality and exclusion.

In some ways, this situation resonates with Petras’ assessment (1999: 430) that NGOs have *“provided a thin stratum of professionals with income in hard currency to escape the ravages of the neo-liberal economy that affects their country, and to climb in the existing social class structure.”* Yet, the picture is complicated by the heterogeneity of experiences and positions *within* the NGO arena in South Sudan, and by the widespread sharing of salaries, which made it difficult to save, to accumulate wealth or study further, depending on one’s salary. Recognition of the extent to which salaries are shared also complicates straightforward notions of a distinct NGO class (c.f. Schuller, 2009), or discrete middle class, in a context in which wealth does not straightforwardly accrue to

individuals or nuclear families, but rather circulates more widely through kin networks and social relations, making it relatively complex to say, “*who owns or consumes what in any stable sense, or what this might mean for membership in a middle class that is assumed to behave in a more individualistic way*” (Mercer & Lemanski, 2020: 433). Rather than a straightforward story of individual accumulation through NGO employment, salaries circulate through social networks, and interlocutors narrated tensions and trade-offs between aspirations for self-development and further education, and social and moral obligations to families and communities. The overall picture reflects Mercer and Lemanski’s (2020) assessment of the *precarity of prosperity* as being central to the lived experiences of ‘middle-classness’ in many contemporary African states.

All this is important for understanding people’s motivations for employment within the aid industry. Rather than a form of voluntary risk-taking or ‘edgework’ motivated by dissatisfaction in one’s existing career and a desire for adventure and self-realisation, as Roth (2015a, 2015b) depicts particularly in relation to international aid workers, for whom aid work represents “*an escape from constraining and alienating working conditions and offers the experience of feeling alive and living on the edge*” (Roth, 2015a: 150), for many of my interlocutors the aid industry was a rare source of salaried employment in a context of profound economic precarity. The situation was more akin to that described by Ong and Combinido (2018) for locally contracted aid workers in the Philippines, many of whom had been propelled into the aid industry by ‘urgent material needs’. At the same time, motivations for moving between organisations within the aid industry were multifaceted; interlocutors often emphasised that they had given up or turned down opportunities for better-paying work, for example, in a desire for greater autonomy and responsibility, for more meaningful work, or through frustrations with hierarchies and inequalities experienced within international organisations. This is explored in the next chapter.

6. Escaping the ‘Implementariat’? Narratives of South Sudanese NGO Founders and Workers

6.1. Chapter introduction

This chapter examines how and why people come to found, lead and work for South Sudanese NGOs. It seeks to understand and shed light on the personal and professional aspirations and motivations that people pursue through NGO work in South Sudan, as reflected in interlocutors’ narratives. It pays particular attention to people’s experiences of and motivations for leaving one organisation to join or found another, considering what this tells us about changing professional identities and aspirations, and about experiences of work in different organisations and institutions. It also points to the many trails and tendrils of connection between international and South Sudanese NGOs, as evident in interlocutors’ career histories.

Following Yarrow (2008, 2011), the chapter foregrounds the self-evaluations and individual choices narrated by interlocutors in the course of life-work history interviews, taking seriously people’s own explanations for what they do and why. It does not seek to assess the veracity or validity of people’s statements, but rather to explore people’s narrations of their own experiences, aspirations and motivations, as well as their self-presentations and positionings, and to consider *“why people present themselves in these ways, and why they emphasize the ideas they do”* (Yarrow, 2011: 46). Through these life history narratives, and following from Long’s (2001) insistence on starting from lived experience, the chapters seek to explore people’s *“involvement in and evaluation of the everyday... by scrupulously following people’s narrations of their unfolding life”* (Spronk, 2020: 473), while recognising that *“experience thus captured does not articulate some kind of truth but is an articulation of mediated feelings and understandings”* (ibid: 473). It therefore also seeks to locate people’s accounts within wider discursive and moral frameworks (Yarrow, 2011), and in relation to broader historical and contextual dynamics. This reflects the broader approach to analysis adopted in this research, as set out in chapter two.

The framing of this chapter references Peters’ concept of the ‘implementariat’. Drawing on an ethnographic study of a development programme in Angola, Peters defines the ‘implementariat’ as *“the class of development workers made up of those rank-and-file staff members working in developing countries for international programs and organizations”* (Peters, 2020: 3). They are seen largely as responsible *“only to carry out the decisions of others”* (ibid: 3), and may include both ‘field-level’ staff working face to face with beneficiaries, and in-country managers and administrators. The defining feature of

the implementariat is that they are tasked with *realising* development plans and policies, not determining what they should be. Their work, Peters argues, includes a significant amount of social and relational labour that is both integral to the everyday implementation of development interventions, and, often, unacknowledged and unrewarded. Peters' analysis resonates with a wider body of research pointing to the hierarchies and inequalities that permeate the global aid industry and that, amongst other things, limit the power and responsibility of locally contracted staff, as well as their opportunities for career progression and international mobility, and their pay and benefits (James, 2020; Ong & Combinido, 2018; Pascucci, 2019; Roth, 2015b; Sundberg, 2019). The data presented here supports this analysis, but also considers some of the ways in which people seek to navigate the hierarchies they encounter in the aid industry, to create space for their own 'projects' (c.f. Long, 2001), and, perhaps, to move beyond the 'implementariat'. These efforts are generally only partially successful, given the common position of South Sudanese NGOs as subcontractors in the humanitarian industry, as discussed in the next chapter.

The starting point for this chapter is the observation of the frequency with which interlocutors had moved between international and South Sudanese NGOs, and of how experiences of work within international organisations, including frustrations around being confined to the 'implementariat', often featured in explanations of movement from the former to the latter. Significant discrepancies in salaries and benefits often lead people to move from South Sudanese to international organisations, with experience in the former helping secure jobs in the latter, as reflected in comments from senior South Sudanese NGO staff members about their organisations being a 'transit area' or 'training ground' for international organisations. However, the picture is complicated, and interviews pointed to regular movement in both directions for a multiplicity of reasons. In particular, a sense of stymied professional authority in international organisations, as well as a lack of responsibility relative to one's experience, frustrations with implementing decisions made by others (especially if they were felt to be incorrect) and a desire for greater control or agency over one's work, all featured heavily in the narratives of those who had left international organisations to found, or work for, South Sudanese NGOs. This included, in some instances, frustrations with a sense of subordination to non-South Sudanese staff, who failed to properly listen to the views of national staff, resulting in interventions that did not properly take account of the context. More broadly, the persistence of the sense of being limited professionally because of classification as a 'national' rather than 'international' staff member, despite the many decades of humanitarian intervention in South Sudan and the many highly

experienced South Sudanese aid workers, is indicative of the ways in which the aid industry remains a “*racialized project*” (Roth, 2015b: 169).

Though this theme of ‘escaping the implementariat’ was particularly clear amongst NGO founders and directors, it was also seen in the narratives of South Sudanese NGO staff, reflecting perceptions and lived experiences of different organisations and working cultures. A desire for opportunities to learn, to be challenged, and to grow professionally, played a role in shaping decision-making about movement between organisations, alongside factors related to location, salary and benefits. The chapter therefore highlights the multiplicity of motivations shaping movement between different organisations, including not just salaries, but also working cultures, experiences of hierarchies and inequalities within different organisations, and assessments of the possibilities for impact.

This multiplicity of motivations for movement between international and South Sudanese NGOs is the focus of the first section of this chapter. This section also highlights the persistence of hierarchies and inequalities within international organisations in South Sudan, in ways that intimately shaped interlocutors’ experiences as ‘local’ or ‘national’ staff and influenced decisions about whether to stay or leave. I am not arguing that this is the experience of every national staff member working for an international organisation, and different organisations (and departments and teams within them) will have different working cultures, but it was nonetheless a distinctive theme within the accounts of my interlocutors.

The second section explores narratives of (financial) sacrifice and struggle evident in many interlocutors’ accounts. These narratives are reflective of the lower salaries in South Sudanese NGOs relative to international organisations, and of the very real, everyday challenges of keeping an organisation afloat in the context of South Sudan’s economic crisis, and a highly competitive NGO arena. They are also part of the everyday politics of organisational legitimisation (Hilhorst, 2003) in which NGO actors engage. Interlocutors sought to distance themselves from NGO founders and directors that were seen as having enriched themselves at the expense of the ‘communities’ they were purported to serve, or as having misappropriated funding and thus undermined donors’ trust in South Sudanese organisations.

The third section points to another theme that was relatively common in the accounts of NGO founders and directors: of an aspiration to run, rather than work for, an organisation, because of

a desire to create employment: to be a ‘job creator’ not a ‘job seeker’. This reflects the particular role of NGOs as providers of employment in the context of South Sudan’s economic crisis and vast youth unemployment, as discussed in the previous chapter, with founding an NGO being a way of channelling employment to a particular area.

The final section reflects on findings from the previous three, including the frequency with which prominent NGO leaders had previously worked for international organisations, the financial sacrifices they made to establish and sustain organisations, and their role as providers of (and gatekeepers to) employment. These three themes clearly highlight the significant financial, social and cultural capital required to succeed in the South Sudanese NGO arena, including, typically, an intimate knowledge of the internal workings and practices of international organisations, as well as the relatively powerful position occupied by some NGO actors in South Sudanese society. This returns us to the questions of class and inequality discussed in the previous chapter.

6.2. Escaping the ‘implementariat’?

Differing working cultures, assessments of organisational effectiveness and efficiency, and perceptions of resistance to change within large, well-established international agencies, all influenced job satisfaction, and shaped decision-making about joining, leaving and moving between organisations, alongside more practical considerations about pay, benefits and location. This section explores interviewees’ reflections on decisions to move between organisations, considering, first, the narratives of NGO founders and directors who had previously worked for international organisations, and then the experiences of interviewees who had moved between international and national NGOs as staff members.

A significant number of South Sudanese NGO founders and directors have previously worked for international NGOs or UN agencies, sometimes in quite senior positions. In many of their accounts, founding a national NGO was narrated as a way of navigating the effective glass ceiling that they had encountered in international organisations. Some had left international organisations because their contracts had ended, but many others had left or turned down well-paying jobs. They quite consistently narrated their frustrations with a lack of decision-making power within international organisations, and a desire for greater independence. Their accounts reflect the persistent hierarchies and inequalities found within international organisations, including in South Sudan, that limit opportunities for influence and progression amongst

nationally contracted staff (see James, 2020; Sundberg, 2019), but also point to one way in which people have sought to navigate this, with mixed success.

This is illustrated by the account of one interviewee, a man who was running a mid-sized, sub-nationally based NGO. He had spent much of his childhood living as a refugee in neighbouring countries, where he attended primary school, secondary school and university, before returning to South Sudan. He then worked for several years for international NGOs within South Sudan, in increasingly senior positions. He established the organisation he now runs around a decade prior to our first meeting, with a group of friends from the local area. Reflecting on his career trajectory, he says,

Before, I worked with some international organizations. One of my problems with international organizations is the role and the influence you can make is very limited, everything, you remain at the receiving end, even if what you know is not working, okay?... because it is taken as if knowledge flows from the developed world to the poor countries. So, whatever you think can work locally doesn't seem to be acknowledged or accepted, at certain level.

His perspective was grounded, not just in his own experience of working within international NGOs, but also in a degree of disappointment with what he sees as a lack of change in his local area, despite many years of projects and programmes implemented by international NGOs and UN agencies. He reflects, for example, “*since we were young, we've been hearing NGOs, a lot of things happening, maybe in [name of town], in [name of town], in our locality, I don't know much about the other parts of South Sudan. But it is very difficult to have something tangible and say this has changed in the last 10, 20 years.*” The problem, in his opinion, is that “*there is very little understanding of, first of all, what we are bringing, is it what these people want? Can it work here in the first place? You know, this kind of local context and understanding, what are we capable of doing in the first place?*” This ‘investigative nature’ of programme inception was, in his opinion, very scarce; instead, “*things are already designed in the west or in Juba, and they're just implemented.*”⁹⁹ Nonetheless, his aspirations to do things differently in a national NGO were only partially fulfilled, since they still found themselves constrained in many ways by what donors were willing to fund (as discussed in chapter seven).

Another interviewee had worked for ten years in one international NGO, before leaving in order to focus full-time on a sub-nationally based NGO that he had helped to co-found. Quitting his

⁹⁹ Interview, 7 November 2021 (b)

job, a relatively senior, well-paid position in Juba, was “*risky*”; he was supporting not only his children, who were in primary and secondary school, but also his two siblings, who were at university. Nonetheless, he reflected that “*working in an international organisation, I realised my capacity was not used to the extent that I wanted, to own the programme... most of the things have been cooked for you and then you just try to implement. You don’t think and try to reason things out, to try things out, to bring in initiative and creativity... I thought I would get more experience, more changes, working in a national organisation that has been established by people on the ground compared to working in an international organisation.*”¹⁰⁰ A third interviewee, the director of a long-standing national NGO engaged in peacebuilding, reflected similarly that, in his own experience, “*when you are working with international organisation, you are actually implementing ideas that the organisation have already set, and put forward, for you to implement. So, you are just executing. You don’t have the freedom to suggest otherwise... I found myself with [name of national NGO] contributing much more than I could do when I am working with international organisation.*” Plus, he adds, with an international organisation, “*once the contract ends, I’ll just be kicked out of the organisation, and that is it! So why should you waste a valuable time with another organisation that really you don’t have the freedom to contribute ideas?*”¹⁰¹

These ideas – that in an international NGO, things have already been ‘cooked for you’, and you are ‘just executing’ – resonate with Peters’ analysis of the ‘implementariat’. These narratives reflect experiences of work within international organisations, but also shed light on professional aspirations, including a desire to carve out a space of greater influence, creativity and control, and, in doing so, perhaps to have greater impact. Another interviewee was a man in his late 30s, the founder and director of a small, Juba-based NGO. He was born and grew up in one of South Sudan’s northern states, going to secondary school in the state capital, eventually securing work as a security guard in an international NGO. He was then promoted to an assistant project officer role, and began studying online for a tertiary qualification. He later moved to another international NGO, and then to a UN agency, in increasingly senior positions. However, he became frustrated while working for the international organisations, feeling that his ideas and advice were not being taken seriously. Eventually, he decided to leave, setting up a new organisation. His salary is sporadic and significantly lower than it was in the international organisations. Nonetheless, he reflects,

¹⁰⁰ Interview, 19 August 2019 (d)

¹⁰¹ Interview, 21 March 2020

*I can work with the international, as I had been working with them before, I have qualification... I can get a job. But I need to be in a decision making. I need to be in a place where the decisions are made... Not the way that you can just tell me do this, do it this way. If you don't do it this way, maybe you are fired and all this.*¹⁰²

These accounts often entailed a sense of trade-off: running an organisation might offer scope for greater influence and creativity, but it often also involved a pay-cut and a greater sense of uncertainty over one's income, as well as a significant degree of stress. Some interlocutors had been offered and had rejected roles within international organisations, or had seen friends and age-mates with similar qualifications accessing higher salaries; many expressed confidently that they could access employment in international organisations, if they chose to do so. In this sense, national NGO work was often represented as a sacrifice, in a way not dissimilar to that described by Yarrow, who writes that, his interlocutors – NGO workers in Ghana – “*would often elucidate their morality and commitment by reference to the possibilities for material gain they chose to forego*” (Yarrow, 2008: 352).

One interviewee, for example, has worked for close to two decades for national NGOs in South Sudan, including latterly as a director. He is very proud of his work, for which, he reflects, he is well respected. It involved “*mentoring so many people*”, now involved in a very wide range of organisations across South Sudan, and this, he says, is “*always my greatest sense of satisfaction*”. He also enjoyed creating networks, as well as “*the privilege of getting out and reaching out to different people in different places... in different parts of South Sudan and also in different parts of the world.*” At the same time, he reflects,

The sad part of it is that I've given most of my time to these institutions, and I nearly developed high blood pressure, because of too much stress. And that impacts so much on me. Yeah. And then two, is also the reward of it, the benefits. Because working in a national NGO, I took it as a learning ground, but I did not take it as a ground for me to, to get myself established.

As a result, he has not been able to do much of what he terms ‘personal development’, including setting up a house in Juba (as opposed to renting), or establishing businesses that can sustain his family, because the salary has always been too small. Plus, he says, being director of a national organisation entailed a significant amount of stress:

¹⁰² Interview, 25 October 2021 (a)

You have to manage so many expectations. Managing the donor expectations, managing the political dynamic, managing the staff expectation and managing the community expectations. So, you are the headquarters, you don't have any headquarters somewhere. So, the impact is just direct on you, and that can easily affect your social life and family, balancing between your private life and the institutional life becomes difficult... I nearly had sleepless nights, being so distressed and sometimes being out of home for a very long time.

At the same time, he has resisted working for a larger organisation, commenting, for example, that, *“even now, I will not work for the UN. Because I don't feel comfortable to work in a complete bureaucracy, that is so much demarcated, and that does not give me to experiment my thoughts. So that really kept me [at the previous organisations], because I knew I was learning.”* In addition, he reflects, as director, *“in terms of exposure, it's really so positive... in terms of influencing, it becomes easy, because you will already be knowing a lot of stakeholders, and you can easily communicate and make your perspectives known.”*¹⁰³

This account reflects Roth's assertion that aid organisations are 'greedy organisations', in the demands they place on workers' private lives, characterised by long workdays and work weeks (Roth, 2015b). Roth relates this particularly to the experiences of expatriate aid workers, living in shared accommodation with colleagues, with little separation between 'work' and 'life'; as well as to the intensity of working in emergency relief, and of being separated from family and friends. Fechter similarly describes aid work as an *“all-encompassing endeavour, constantly seeping into practitioners' personal and social lives”* (Fechter, 2012: 1391), focusing primarily on international aid workers. Yet, a similar sense of aid organisations as greedy organisations was clear in interviews, particularly with NGO directors, several of whom pointed to the impact of the intense and demanding nature of NGO work on their relationships with their families. Another director reflected, for example, that *“humanitarian work disconnects one from family life. That is the most painful thing. My kids are growing and I don't see them grow... they have grown to learn how to live without me because they know even when I come home, maybe the maximum I can spend home is one week, and I'm gone.”*¹⁰⁴ A third commented that, *“even when you go home, you are there physically, but mentally, you are still working. You know? You're still working, like these issues of Zoom, they follow you, when even you are on leave, you tell kids, please don't make noise, I'm doing this.”*¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Interview, 18 November 2021 (b)

¹⁰⁴ Interview, 12 November 2021 (a)

¹⁰⁵ Interview, 10 November 2021 (b)

Importantly, ideas around opportunities for influence and learning, and around the potential for impact in international versus South Sudanese NGOs, were reflected not just in the narratives of founders and directors, but also of some national NGO staff members, who felt – often based on their own experiences of working for different organisations – that the opportunities for gaining experience, as well as the level of responsibility enjoyed, were greater within national NGOs than within international NGOs or UN agencies. One interviewee, for example, was a young woman who was born in South Sudan, and had completed much of her education in Uganda. After finishing a bachelor's degree in Kampala, she moved to Juba, where she started volunteering in a women's rights organisation. She did this for several months, receiving small incentives for her transport and food, while looking for paid work that would help her to support her mother and siblings. Eventually, she secured a role at a national women's rights NGO. She has since worked in the organisation for several years, in different positions and different parts of the country, and enjoys her work, which focuses on issues she has been “*passionate about right from school*”. She reflected that,

I have friends working for international organisations, but they keep saying in national organisations, we get more interaction, like we do more work with community, and you get hands-on experience. That's what they say they envy about our work. Because like for them now, like if they are at that donor level, they are dealing with partners, they are not the ones implementing, partners are the ones who go and implement, partners like us. So, for them, they wait to, to get reports through the partners, maybe they pay one or two donor visits, and that is it. And for us, we have that experience of interacting with the community, and doing work with them, and seeing change and all that, pushing for a given cause.¹⁰⁶

The notion that working for a South Sudanese organisation enabled one to do ‘hands-on’ work was relatively common. This perspective, for example, was expressed by another interviewee, who is employed by a relatively small, sub-nationally based organisation that has worked continuously in one area for almost 20 years. He himself grew up in the area, completing primary and secondary school locally and then a diploma in a neighbouring country. After this, he returned and began working for another locally based NGO as a volunteer, which later became a paid position. He did this for four years, before joining the current organisation two years prior to the interview. This organisation gains some funding from its members, some from income generation activities and some from international organisations, but the latter cover largely specific activities, but not salaries. He reflected,

¹⁰⁶ Interview, 15 November 2021 (c)

*When I joined, I was thinking of going ahead, of going to the other organisation, that I can be earning a lot of money and all that. But coming now, when I get into the system, I thought ... it is better to work with that organisation and helping the community at the grassroots than working with the big organisations that are focusing only on the people in other places... if you are working at [this organisation], you can focus on the people at the grassroots and help them with their needs, because you are living among them, and you know what is affecting them, and at least you can be advocating on behalf of them.*¹⁰⁷

In this case, working for a local NGO enabled him to continue living and working in close proximity to communities at the ‘grassroots’ and, in his view, to have a greater impact.

Others argued that working for a South Sudanese NGO offered greater opportunities for learning and responsibility. One interlocutor, a man in his 30s who had been working for several years for one national NGO, emphasised that working for a national NGO was “*not easy*”; both the amount of work and the physical conditions could be demanding. Nonetheless, he says, at a national NGO, “*you can grow*”, because “*they will throw you into deep waters, you will do work for three, four positions. You will be multi-tasked, your service will be tested... [but] you get to interface with the community, you see how your community suffers. And you’ll be like, no, let me just put all these problems aside and serve these people.*” Plus, he is in a relatively senior position at the organisation, and feels that he would be more constrained in an international organisation, arguing, “*I feel more impactful when I can decide and think freely on what I can do with the programme.*”¹⁰⁸

A similar view was expressed in interviews and conversations with interlocutors who had moved from national to international organisations, and so had experiences of working in both. An informant in Wau, who had worked for a local NGO and was now employed by an international organisation, emphasised that he had learned a lot with former, and felt the environment was better – “*like a family*” – but the payment was very bad, so he left. In his new role, however, he says with a laugh, he “*only interacts with papers*”,¹⁰⁹ a comment partly reflecting the shift away from direct implementation amongst (some) international organisations. Another interlocutor, who had worked for many years with a Juba-based national NGO before moving, recently, to an international organisation, commented, for example, that,

¹⁰⁷ Interview, 16 August 2019 (b)

¹⁰⁸ Interview, 21 November 2021 (b)

¹⁰⁹ Fieldnotes, February 2020

I felt like my moment of growth, my career moment of growth, was within the national NGO, because that is when we actually did the real dirty work, I would get thrown into the deep end with very little experience to actually facilitate community dialogues between real people, between chiefs, between community leaders. ... [And] we would get to talk to a lot of government actors, especially at the local government level. We conducted a lot of trainings for them. And I think that they respected us as a result, they thought we were adding value to their work, we talk, commissioners really respected us, local government staff really respected us. For me, I thought that was really rich... And then we would engage in, I would say, real, real, real stuff, in terms of, the kinds of activities we would do, were actually what I would say people, what, would need, or what people would recommend, very issue-based activities.

In his new role at a large, relief-oriented international NGO, however, the salary is significantly better, and he has access to better internet, and to good health care. He reflects, “*I get consumed by the pressure of how the world, how neoliberalism, and how the sector operates, to need money, to be able to have a good education, to be able to have a good access to internet.*” At the same time, he is often frustrated in his new role, reflecting that,

International organizations hire, use a lot of expats. A lot of expats, who are usually very young, do not understand the context, will come and will be very highly paid within the organisation and as a result, usually because they come in with this ego, that they're experts, many experts do not understand the context and therefore, use their presumed theories of other contexts, then implement projects. And usually they don't pay attention to understand the issues. So, I have been very frustrated, because I see a lot of experts who don't understand the context and don't understand the issue, dominating in conversations, because they need to look and sound eloquent to justify their salaries. So, you have to dominate in conversation, otherwise why are you, on your role? It's an issue of ego as well. I mean, if you're being paid 7,000 US dollars, a national cannot tell you what to do.

In addition, he said, meetings in which decisions were made, strategies were devised and proposals were drafted tended to take place amongst expatriate staff, who held the more senior roles in the organisation; as a result, “*you're having a conversation amongst expats on the issues of South Sudanese*”, while “*nationals who understand who are probably more junior staff, who are officers, and assistants, who understand their real issues, do not participate in those high level conversations within international organisations.*”¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Interview, 13 November 2021 (a)

A similar perspective was expressed by another interlocutor, who had worked as a civil servant in a government department after the CPA, and then for an international NGO, before moving to a senior role at a South Sudanese NGO, where he remained for many years. More recently, he has moved again to a small, specialised international NGO, where he again remained for several years, working in a number of different roles in different parts of the country. Similarly to the interviewees above, he reflected that, in a national organisation, *“you have the opportunity, you know, to try many things really. And as a result, you also tend to learn a lot.”* He continued, *“international agencies, yes, they pay good money... but there is a situation where, you know, that freedom is not there, you know, you feel you know, like, you're squeezed, you feel you have to you know, agree to everything, because you are on contract. If you don't agree, you know, this contract can end, and it cannot be renewed. ... you need to continue working, you need to, you know, have good evaluation, and that is it.”* His own perspective is that that ‘freedom’ is there in national NGOs, because *“your colleagues are South Sudanese, you can disagree, and this disagreement will not be taken in a different way”*. He feels, however, that his current employer, however, a small international NGO, is different from many other international organisations, reflecting,

But [this INGO] is really unique, and that is why up to now I am still working for [this INGO]. Because, you know, the, the working and you know, sometimes what motivates people is not only the money, right? But also the work environment, the, how, you know, colleagues relate to one another. Alice, I must tell you, I really enjoyed working for [INGO]. When I was based in [location], it was really good. You know. The terminology ‘boss’ was not there... [it] was not in our vocabulary. It was really a very good working environment.¹¹¹

He is hoping, next, to return to working for a national NGO. His account is a useful reminder of the heterogeneity of experiences and working environments within both national and international organisations. Different organisations (South Sudanese and international alike) can vary significantly in terms of workplace culture, communication and distribution of responsibilities across staff, amongst other things; and in any one organisation, there are likely to be differences in experience between departments, and over time, based on the personalities of different staff members.

¹¹¹ Interview, 25 January 2022 (remote)

The gulf in salaries between international and South Sudanese NGOs, alongside the opportunities to gain greater responsibility more quickly within the latter, and, generally, the higher requirements for experience and qualifications amongst international organisations, have contributed to rapid staff turnover within South Sudanese NGOs and to a strong sense of these organisations as a ‘training ground’ for international organisations. A recent survey suggested that in South Sudan, the average mid-range salary was \$11,300 in an L/NNGO, \$30,600 in an INGO, and \$91,600 for UN staff (Obrecht & Swithern, 2022).

Movement between organisations was not always in the direction of national to international NGOs, however. Several interviewees had moved from international to national NGOs, often in order to take up a more senior position or in search of a new challenge. One man, for example, had worked for a donor organisation, then for a small international NGO, and then for a larger international organisation, based in Juba. He worked at the latter for several years, before resigning to go and work for a South Sudanese NGO in his hometown. In this new role, rather than being in a project officer position, he would be running a department. His first motivation, he says, was *“to be back home”*; the second was *“to be a little independent, because it is also a test of your capability – you never know your input, how good you are, until you are on your own and see, now this I can manage. With [name of international organisation] there are so many experts... you don't know which of the end product, is this your effort or is this the effort of your colleague?”* Plus, in his new role, he says, he has *“the opportunity to sit and decide which strategy is good for intervention, or which will bring better results, other than being, sitting and being told, ‘please can you do this’ without knowing the reasons behind.”*¹¹²

Of course, just as people narrated leaving international organisations because of a sense of frustration that their views were not being considered, so too were there examples of people leaving national NGOs because of a desire for greater decision-making power, or because of frustrations with senior management. This was particularly the case where they became disillusioned with the way an organisation was being run, and where their suggestions for improvement were ignored. In at least four cases, interviewees became aware of malpractice and confronted the leadership of the organisation, but resigned when things did not change. Two left and established new organisations, another secured employment with an international agency, and a fourth with another South Sudanese organisation. A common complaint, more broadly, was that national NGOs are often quite founder-dominated, making it harder for those in other positions to influence these organisations: this is both a driver and a product of rapid staff

¹¹² Interview, 20 August 2019 (a)

turnover, and of the challenges South Sudanese organisations face in staff retention. Founders and directors, in turn, complained that the limited provision for salaries in subcontracts from international organisations, combined with the significantly higher salaries available in the latter, made it difficult for them to retain staff, placing a significant burden on them. There are also organisations where directors and senior staff have taken significant steps to support and promote more junior members of staff, and to distribute authority more widely within the organisation, and to promote staff retention.

In practice, motivations for moving between organisations were often multifaceted. A desire for greater responsibility or a new challenge, differences in salary and benefits, the location of a job, perceptions of the impact of a job or organisation, changing family responsibilities, and other factors could all play a role. Nonetheless, the sense of frustration and dissatisfaction that interlocutors expressed over their position as national staff within the hierarchies of international humanitarian organisations, including a sense that their views and ideas were not being taken seriously, was relatively common. In some ways, this was about the difference between working for a large international organisation, in which important decisions were made in headquarters elsewhere, and working for a small organisation, accountable to a locally based board, or wider membership. One of the interlocutors quoted above, for example, had reflected in an earlier interview, that,

I have worked also in other organizations before, sometimes you can just feel frustrated that, you are on the ground... but you need an approval from somebody maybe in New York, so as to do it, the person cannot understand the context... with this national organization, even decisions beyond me [as director], will have to be made by a board who are here, who understand the context, if you explain to them and say okay, please, we have to go this direction, because this and this and this is, is what is happening, they can see, they can feel and they understand it... it is easier to convince them than convincing somebody who might not understand the local context.¹¹³

Other examples were more directly related to a sense of subordination and frustration within international organisations, specifically as national, South Sudanese staff. This is supported by findings from several other contexts (James, 2020; Ong & Combinido, 2018; Peters, 2016; Roth, 2015). As Peters writes, the partitioning of staff into ‘local’ versus ‘foreign’ is part of development industry doxa (Peters, 2016; drawing on Bourdieu, 1977); these categories are

¹¹³ Interview, 17 August 2019 (a)

socially produced through specific human actions, but seem so self-evident that *“the industry cannot imagine its workers through other means”* (Peters, 2016: 498). Each category subsumes and conceals heterogeneous identities, experiences and positionalities; and yet, the binary itself profoundly shapes people’s experiences of and position within the aid industry. The ‘professional distinction’ between local and expatriate staff *“justifies differential treatment of staff members and their discrepant influence over development work”* (Peters, 2016: 497). In this way, global inequalities are perpetuated and reproduced within the very industry that is, ostensibly, working to overcome them (Peters, 2020; Roth, 2015). These inequalities and hierarchies are frequently racialised, bound up with assumptions about who possesses expertise, knowledge and ‘capacity’ that are deeply entrenched in the humanitarian and development industries (Bian, 2022; Crewe & Fernando, 2006; Kothari, 2006), linked to the *“assumption of white superiority and expertise within development as part of the wider, global distribution of racialized power”* (Kothari, 2006: 15).

Several authors point to a sense of disillusionment amongst those inhabiting the category of ‘national’ staff with their relative lack of influence and authority, in ways that strongly resonate with the experiences of interlocutors discussed above. Sundberg’s work (2019, 2020), for example, highlights persistent inequalities between locally contracted desk officers working for foreign donors in Tanzania, and their ‘posted’ colleagues, sent from donor headquarters and sharing the same nationality as their employer. Tanzanian staff might share the same job descriptions, titles, rank and responsibilities as their posted colleagues, as well as having similar professional backgrounds and qualifications. Yet, they did not enjoy the same professional authority. Interviews with both Tanzanian and posted staff suggested that the former were seen as less competent than the latter, and that their opinions carried less weight (Sundberg, 2019). ‘Posted’ and ‘national’ staff were viewed as *“separate and unequally competent and trustworthy categories of employees”* (Sundberg, 2019: 254), which was reflected in differential access to information (including what meetings national staff were invited to, what documents they were allowed to read, and what office spaces they had access to), as well as in remuneration and possibilities for upward mobility. Roth, meanwhile, discussing people’s decisions to move between different organisations within ‘Aidland’, notes that national staff *“left organizations out of frustration when they felt that their contributions were not acknowledged, and that they were barred from permanent positions and promotion”* (Roth, 2015b: 150), and sought international careers, in part, in order to overcome the barriers to promotion they experienced as ‘national’ staff. This was contrasted with the quick promotion of expatriate staff (particularly from the global north) with little experience from junior roles to positions of significant power and responsibility (ibid).

The narratives of interlocutors that had previously worked for international organisations often expressed a similar sense of frustration and disillusionment, shaped by a sense that their professional authority and influence were limited by their position as ‘national’ staff. Their accounts point to the persistence of racial and national inequalities and hierarchies within the humanitarian industry in South Sudan, in ways that limit the possibilities for South Sudanese staff to advance. Indeed, recent research (not specific to South Sudan) confirms that national staff are ‘extremely under-represented’ in the leadership of the international humanitarian system, with most country director posts, for example, still being held by international staff (Obrecht & Swithern, 2022). In South Sudan, I am aware of only a very small number of South Sudanese country directors of international organisations. Certainly, there was a perception amongst interviewees with experience of working in international organisations that their ability to access leadership positions, and to influence decision-making, was restricted by their position as South Sudanese staff.

What these narratives also suggest, however, is that founding, or to a lesser extent working for, a South Sudanese NGO could be considered as a strategy for ‘escaping the implementariat’, albeit one that is only partially successful. Narratives of responsibility, independence and influence over decision-making were relatively common in the accounts of interviewees who had left positions in international organisations to establish, or work for, South Sudanese NGOs, as seen in the idea that in an international NGO, most things have already been ‘cooked for you’. Some pointed to the sense of satisfaction they gained as a result. Another interviewee, the director of a small peacebuilding NGO, reflected that in the international organisation he had worked in before,

My boss just writes the proposal, and tell me to implement. But now, I can write what I think is good, telling my ideas and approved and implementing it in the way I want, with my staff, knowing what can be done, rather than my boss has signed contract somewhere, then come and explain to me, this contract was signed with this and this, so you can implement it like this. So, when I am implementing a project that is written by me, it gives me real energy. That is the difference.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Interview, 16 November 2021

The paradox is that their work remains relatively tightly constrained by donor policies and priorities, with their activities influenced by what international organisations are willing to fund, as is discussed further below.

6.3. Narratives of sacrifice and struggle

References to salaries foregone, or to missed opportunities for ‘personal development’, reflect a related theme of sacrifice and struggle that was common, particularly in the accounts of founders and directors. Interviewees emphasised that establishing an NGO and keeping it going required significant perseverance and commitment, as well as an element of personal and financial sacrifice.

This was seen, for example, in the account of one interlocutor, who is the director of a small, sub-nationally based organisation that had been running for around a decade. When we met in 2019, they had had no funding for the last year, but, the director notes, *“our activity did not stop, I still go to the field, I connect with other partners, and our name is still maintained, we are not, we are attending the meetings, and do some small, small things, and that still shows to the other people we are still on the ground, we are not gone.”* He had used his own small savings, from his salary from earlier projects, to sustain the organisation, but had exhausted this, and was struggling not just to keep the office open, but also to pay his children’s school fees. To keep an organisation going, he says, requires, *“people who are very committed, people who have a clear vision, because what drive me is not the money, it is what I want to see even if I am not there. One day it will be said, this is the labour of [his name], he did this and this.”*¹¹⁵ Indeed, he continues,

Any institution, for it to succeed it requires commitment, it require sacrifice, you may sacrifice yourself, in terms, even your finance, even me I have actually given a lot of money to this institution. When I receive my salary, I don’t get it all. What I do, I keep it, when, like those times when there is no any others, I have to maintain some of the things so that I can give to staff... I also sacrifice myself in terms of time and energy, and even when there is nothing my family can put on the table, I still have to persist.

He continued applying for funding, reflecting, *“I used to wake up at five, to come here [to the office], develop, I have tried so, so many proposals, sent to different people, but the challenge that I have is that you have to be known by that individual before you develop that proposal.”* He is well-respected locally, and has relatively good links with staff in the local offices of international organisations, regularly

¹¹⁵ Interview, 26 June 2019

attending cluster meetings, but had been told that they were not the final decision-makers on proposals; rather, decisions about which partners to fund were being made in Juba. He had been advised by someone in a UN agency that the organisation should establish an office in the capital, in order to build connections with those who are the ‘decision makers’, but they could not afford to do so. In addition, with so many NGOs formed in the town in recent years, competition is very high. By the time we met in 2020 and 2021, the organisation was receiving funding again, and he had a small salary. He has given himself another five years to work at the organisation, and to try and make it stable; he did not want to leave while the organisation was in crisis, because this would not, he says, be ‘honourable’.

Another interviewee, the director of the small peacebuilding NGO, quoted above, explained that he was receiving around 180 USD per month, and struggling to sustain his family, but that he did not want to be *“somebody trying something and then at the end of the day, you run away from it.”*¹¹⁶ A third was a man running a sub-nationally based disability rights NGO. He had worked several years previously for an international NGO. During that period, he says, *“my life was better”*; he was able to save enough money to buy the cattle he needed to get married, to construct a *tukul* where he is now living, and to buy a car (which he can no longer afford to run). Nonetheless, he says, *“I and some of my colleagues, most especially our programme manager... we have taken it seriously. That one has made us not to source for other green pastures for our own personal growth and development, like getting a job with international NGOs cannot be difficult for somebody like me.”*¹¹⁷ They persevere, he says, because they believe in the organisation’s work and want it to continue, but – with only intermittent salaries – they cannot afford to hire replacements, and are worried that the organisation would ‘die off’ without them.

This sense of ongoing financial sacrifice and struggle was a common theme. There is a perception of NGO directors as wealthy, but the reality in many cases was of a precarious and intermittent income. Subcontracts from international organisations – the primary source of funding for a South Sudanese NGO – often do not include provision for the salary of a director, or include only a small percentage. Smaller, sub-national organisations were often given in-kind support, or funding that covered activities only, with no provision for salaries. Some grants

¹¹⁶ Interview, 16 November 2021

¹¹⁷ Interview, 25 November 2021 (c)

include no or little overhead.¹¹⁸ As a result, only the directors of the largest organisations were earning a reliable, regular salary, while others were often struggling to make ends meet.

Narratives of sacrifice and struggle were also bound up with a sense of ambivalence in interlocutors' accounts about the role of money in their motivations. Another interviewee, a woman in her 40s who is the director of a small, sub-national women's rights organisation in a different part of the country, operating largely as a membership-based organisation with intermittent donor funding, reflected, for example,

What you are here for is to help your people... The work of civil society is not only put your mind about money. If you want to help people, don't put it in your mind that every activity you are going to do, you are going to pay for it. ... You see how, 2009 up to 2016 I am not getting any money, but I was still fighting to push that organisation because it is me who come with my vision. ... [Even now] I am not putting my mind about money. Even there is a proposal we write, there is no salary for director. Don't put your mind about money, what I want is the progress of this place, in the future people will remember me when I will be in the grave, or I will be somewhere.¹¹⁹

Indeed, ideas about one's 'legacy', or how one will be remembered, were relatively common. Another interviewee was a young woman who had grown up in Kenya, returning to South Sudan several years ago and now living in Juba. She worked for some time for another national NGO, and then for a small number of private businesses. With the latter, she saved part of her income, planning to use these savings to establish an organisation that would support women in her home county (though with the hope, eventually, of expanding). She recruited board members, mostly women working in international organisations. They pooled their funding to set up the organisation, and to begin activities related to economic empowerment, based on the requests of women in the local area, a county in the west of the country. The local government gave them land on which to build an office in the county, and they used their own money to set up an office in Juba. They have subsequently raised further funding from international organisations, and – unusually – from businesses in the capital. Like several others, she linked her commitment to her faith, stating,

¹¹⁸ The term overhead is used to refer "to expenditure outside of normal programme implementation costs that are necessary for an organisation to deliver its mission" (Girling-Morris, 2023: 38), potentially including the cost of senior management and support staff, or of establishing organisational systems (ibid).

¹¹⁹ Interview, 19 August 2019 (a)

I don't want my legacy to be like in houses, luxury things, but I want my legacy to be people... Even if I'm gone one day, my name will remain [emphatic]. And people will be like, [her name] did this. And that is it. I've never seen somebody being buried with their wealth, all the wealth they acquired, or with their houses. But all these things, we leave them here, we go back the way we came from, because I'm a Christian, I believe that.

Another young man, for example, a self-described activist who had been involved for several years with an arts-focused NGO, occasionally on paid projects but primarily as a volunteer, reflected, somewhat similarly to the interviewees above,

[My life has been] obstacles, obstacles, obstacles, but I believe that I'm a human being, I will die one day without carrying with me laptop or computer, or maybe house, I will die alone. You know, but my part in the in the world, in the country, is what, is supposed to be a positive person. So the day that I will pass away from here, the people will remember, ah, somebody who really did something. But if I gain anything, gain money, what, what, and I did nothing, one day, I will leave that money, I will leave everything. For what?

In this way, interviewees' accounts often reflected what Yarrow (2011: 67) describes as a “*tension between moral commitment and material gain*”. Interlocutors emphasised their own commitment and sacrifice, in terms of financial resources invested into the organisation, or foregone opportunities for higher salaries elsewhere. At the same time, interlocutors often questioned the motivations of others for whom material gain was seen as the main reason for establishing an NGO. They were ambivalent about the role of money in their motivations; as the man quoted at the beginning of this section reflected, “*getting more money sometimes, is not bad to have more money, but it disorganise you, it takes you away from the community, and you become rich, you are the only one enjoying everything. And you leave the other people suffering.*”¹²⁰ Making a living from NGO work was not a problem, but money could ‘disorganise’ you, and was seen as a problem specifically when it became a primary motivation. Instead, as in each of these cases, interlocutors emphasised their vision, sacrifice and commitment, as well as a desire to do something for which they will be remembered.

The sources of this commitment, as narrated by interlocutors, were many and varied. Faith often played a significant role, as in one of the accounts above. Interviewees had diverse backgrounds, as discussed in the previous chapter. Many located their commitment and motivation in lived

¹²⁰ Interview, 1 December 2021 (b)

experiences of hardship and poverty, often emphasising the struggles of their childhood and a sense of not wanting others to go through what they, or their family members, had gone through. Interviewees also, often, highlighted the sacrifices that others had made to enable them to reach the position they were in, including, particularly, family members that had contributed to their education. A connected theme was of a sense of privilege as one of relatively few South Sudanese who had completed a high level of formal education. Here, forming an NGO, for example, could also be a way of *“paying back to the community or sharing what I have.”*¹²¹

Narratives downplaying the significance of money in one’s motivations are also part of the ‘everyday politics of organisational legitimization’ (Hilhorst, 2003) whereby, in the context of South Sudan’s exceptionally competitive humanitarian arena, NGO actors seek to distinguish themselves from ‘others’ who are motivated primarily by a desire for financial gain. An NGO is a ‘claim-bearing label’, in that in most definitions it is depicted as an organisation that is *“doing good for the development of others”* (Hilhorst, 2007: 306). NGO actors thus engage in a struggle over *“which organizations are entitled to call themselves NGO”* (ibid: 305) – a struggle bound up with competition for funding and popular support, and thus intimately conflictual and power-ridden – and must convince others of their trustworthiness and ‘genuine-ness’ (ibid). Through the everyday politics of NGO legitimization, NGO actors *“negotiate the meaning of their organization and enrol outsiders into accepting it”* (Hilhorst, 2003: 7). The politics of legitimization, Hilhorst writes, are a matter of organisational survival, with an NGO’s reputation as a trustworthy, reliable actor that is ‘doing good for the development of others’ its main asset (ibid); a fact of which interlocutors were keenly aware.

The struggle over organisational legitimacy is exceptionally fraught in South Sudan, partly because competition for funding is so intense, with a large and growing number of national NGOs competing for a relatively small share of aid resources. Interlocutors complained that NGO actors who had misappropriated money had made things harder for others, who faced an uphill battle to earn the trust of prospective donors in a context in which misgivings about their motivations were pervasive. Added to this is that NGO actors must seek to distinguish themselves, not only from NGO directors who had misappropriated funding, but also from South Sudan’s monetised politics, in which loyalties are bought and traded in a ‘political marketplace’ (de Waal, 2014, 2015); and from its reputation as a country in which corruption is pervasive. In 2022, for example, South Sudan ranked 178 out of 180 in Transparency

¹²¹ Interview, 21 March 2020

International's Corruption Perceptions Index, a measure of public sector corruption; a small improvement on 2021, when it ranked 180 (Transparency International, 2022, 2023).

Nonetheless, interviewees from South Sudanese NGOs felt they were held to a higher standard than international organisations, feeling that trust, for a national organisation, was both harder to gain, and easier to lose. All this leads to substantial pressure on NGO actors to demonstrate, in various ways, their legitimacy as organisations acting 'for the development of others'.

One man, for example, the director of a relatively large South Sudanese NGO, commented one afternoon when we were talking in his office in Juba, a modest house-turned-office-building in a residential area, that most NGO founders 'just want money', and that any good cause 'comes second'.¹²² As a result, he says, you must show you are 'humble', and that you are not eating the money. This was important in managing relationships with donors, staff, and politicians. People can see how you are living; if you are going to Pyramid (a very expensive hotel in Juba), and have lots of nice things, he says, 'people will know'. People see, for example, that he lives in a *tukul*, and has a small phone; that he is 'not like the other ones'. Amongst other things, managing what he described as regular requests for money and support from local politicians was easier if you are able to show that you are not just *"using the money for yourself"*; that *"you're not selfish, you're not using this money extravagantly, you are not misusing anything."*¹²³

As depicted both by Hilhorst (2003) and Yarrow (2011), interviewees often questioned the motivations of others, seeking to distance themselves from those who treated an NGO as their 'personal property'. One interviewee, for example, a board member and co-founder of a small NGO in an eastern state, argued that *"lack of trust is becoming a major issue"*, because *"there are some organisations, when they are funded, they go and misuse the funds. And later on, the donors, they will not trust other local organisations that are also applying."* Instead, in a statement echoing many others, he argued,

*There are those that established their organization with the aim of to impact the community, to achieve their goal that they set the organisation to have. And there are those that when they get enough money, then they resign, they want to use them for their personal benefit instead of developing the community with the fund that was given to them.*¹²⁴

¹²² Field notes, October 2021

¹²³ Interview, 27 November 2021

¹²⁴ Interview, 7 November 2021 (a)

Others lamented the prevalence of ‘briefcase organisations’, arguing, for example, “*there are many organisations of that type in this country*”.¹²⁵ South Sudan’s recent proliferation of NGOs was often attributed to the country’s ongoing economic and humanitarian crisis, the profound lack of opportunities for waged employment, and the growing numbers of unemployed university graduates. As one interlocutor, a man who has been working in the aid industry in South Sudan since the 1990s, latterly as the director of a large, well-established NGO, argued,

There are 500 plus national NGOs in in this country now. Some of the national NGOs, the founding philosophy is not on the right footing. People see that I have succeeded, and [think] they can succeed. They don't understand my background. They don't understand where I'm coming from. I'm coming from an area where I used to walk 55 kilometres on foot to go and provide services, not asking for money, being paid a bag of dura and lentil... It was passion for me. And because of that, I think the commitments are totally different. But nevertheless, the things we do attracts funds. And funds is what everybody is looking for in this country now. There's no employment, the government structures have collapsed, they are not paying salaries, or, and if they are paying salaries, maybe you get 5000 [South Sudanese] pounds in a month, that you don't even receive regularly. So how do you sustain your family? So, people are looking for avenues where perhaps there'll be revenue from them.

He was not unsympathetic, but argued that people would quickly run into difficulty if they did not have “*any justification apart from the money bit of it*”. He explained, “*if anybody goes into the NGO sector with that ideology, I doubt whether they will succeed. Because you, if you don't have financial discipline, you don't have self-control, and even if you are the founder and the boss and you think this is your personal property, then you are going the wrong direction.*”¹²⁶ As indicated in this quote (and as discussed below), thresholds of financial accountability for South Sudanese NGOs are high, and interviewees often also noted that organisations that misappropriated funding were unlikely to last long. In contrast, interlocutors often emphasised their own focus on accountability and transparency. Directors’ offices typically contained cabinets filled with row-upon-row of neatly labelled box files. One interviewee, the director of a small, recently founded Juba-based NGO, argued that he wanted his organisation to reflect “*the true nature of being a humanitarian in terms of accountability*”. What this meant, he elaborated, was that “*if we have anything that has been given by the donor, to be used to assist the community, it has to go to the community, we always have very clear documentation of what we have been given. That is the reason why you see all those filing [gestures - filing cabinet full of box files, folders]. Compared to the,*

¹²⁵ Interview, 25 January 2022

¹²⁶ Interview, 12 November 2021 (a)

*I'm not talking negatively about other national NGOs, but there are those accountability related issues which also has affected so many national NGOs.'*¹²⁷

My aim here is not to assess the veracity of these claims, nor to argue that NGO actors either are, or should be, free from 'material interests'; but rather to point to the prevalent discourses circulating in South Sudan's humanitarian arena that form part of the fraught, everyday politics of NGO legitimisation. Seeking to maintain a reputation as an organisation 'doing good for the development of others' was important for relationships not just with donors, but with staff, political authorities, and the wider South Sudanese citizenry in locations where an organisation was working. Competition for funding is intense, and for South Sudanese NGOs, a reputation as trustworthy custodians of donor funding is hard-won and easily lost. Here, an ability to adhere to complex donor systems of accountability and reporting, including rigorous audits and cumbersome reporting processes, was paramount. It is partly for this reason so many of the more prominent national NGOs engaged in South Sudan's humanitarian arena have directors and senior staff with many years' experience working for international organisations: without this, accessing the resources of the international humanitarian system is very difficult. This is discussed in the next section.

I would also point out that what is labelled misuse of funding can itself be complex, and intimately political. For example, interviewees often framed the relative expense of international organisations, including high salaries of expatriate staff members, as a misuse of humanitarian funding intended for affected communities, not dissimilarly to the way in which they criticised NGO founders who had disappeared with funding. Interviewees frequently lamented that money 'meant for South Sudan' never reached or quickly flowed out of the country. Much of this relates back to heightened debates over what constitutes an appropriate or effective use of humanitarian funding, which was a source of considerable contention in South Sudan's humanitarian arena. In addition, what may appear to be misuse of funding, a lack of transparency, or poor practices of documentation and accountability, can in fact be part of the effort of an NGO to navigate the constraints of international donor funding (c.f. Moro et al., 2020), an effort to channel funding to things requested by or more relevant to the communities they work with, but difficult to fund, or a way to try to recompense staff when projects are funded without support for staff costs. Most funding for South Sudanese NGOs takes the form of highly prescriptive subgrants, sometimes with little or no overhead, or provision for staff

¹²⁷ Interview, 25 October 2021 (a)

salaries. In this context, as one interviewee (a South Sudanese staff member of an international organisation who had previously worked for national organisations) highlighted, organisations, *“will actually use activity money to cover salaries and the issues that they need, and then manipulate the donor in one way or another. Because they are pressed, they need to be creative with how they manage the money”*. Of course, as this interlocutor pointed out, there are also *“many examples of organisations that have used that donor money for useless things, self-enrichment things, but such organisations collapse, they do not, they do not survive for long, because then it becomes obvious, they fail to account.”*¹²⁸

6.4. Being a ‘job creator’

Another reason narrated by founders and directors for resigning from or rejecting offers for work with international organisations was a desire to create employment for others. Several interviewees described wanting to be a ‘job creator’ or ‘job maker’, linking their motivations particularly to youth unemployment in South Sudan. The founder and director of a mid-sized organisation, based and operating in the country’s south-west, reflected, for example, *“I have got even opportunities here to work with the other international organisations, I refused. Even now, up to now, people are still [inviting me] to work, but I feel, I would be a job creator. And my friends are feeling the same. Better we start and give, we work, and create some livelihood to other people to survive through these activities, when we are being supported to help the community also.”*¹²⁹ Another interviewee, the director of a mid-sized organisation in a different part of the country, reflected that, on founding the organisation, he thought, *“instead of me employing myself so that I earn, I make a living alone, why not for me to think about something big, like to have my own institution, which I can be able also to employ other people.”*¹³⁰

A third, a woman running a large, Juba-based NGO that has grown very rapidly, founded the organisation after working for an international organisation and a bank. She recounts, *“I started looking at issues of one, how better can I position myself as an individual to create change? That became my driving factor. Secondly, the other bit that came to me was because I had been in that, in employment for you know, some two years. It gives me a clearer picture of how young people were literally hustling to look for employment opportunities, and not everyone was privileged enough to get those opportunities.”* She felt, *“I’m no longer interested in employment, you know, and I was going to, you know, do something that will create more employment opportunities for others.”*¹³¹ She considered founding a business, but argued that in South

¹²⁸ Interview, 13 November 2021 (a)

¹²⁹ Interview, 17 August 2019 (a)

¹³⁰ Interview, 1 December 2021 (c)

¹³¹ Interview, 8 December 2021

Sudan there was no real way to get enough capital to set something up; instead, she settled on an NGO. They primarily employ young people, offering jobs and internships to recent graduates.

Interviewees also often highlighted the number of people they employed, and the ways in which their employees' lives had changed as a result, particularly where staff were paid in dollars. The director of a relatively large national NGO, working primarily in the country's north-east, explained that the organisation now employed several hundred people, almost all of whom came from and were based in the area where the organisation was working: *"You find that we are very big, more than the [government] ministries. We create jobs. There are some youth, they finish school, get a job, then he settle his or her life. If he has a job, he has money, he can do anything, he can even support his family, the children, their parents. So, the living conditions can change."*¹³² This points to the shifting dynamics of employment in South Sudan, from government to NGOs, as discussed in the previous chapter. Another interlocutor, a senior member of staff in a relatively large NGO, introduced earlier in this chapter, noted that they employed around 300 people, all of them paid in dollars; *"these staff are committed, you see their life is changing... we feel really proud of that."*¹³³

What this reflects and reiterates, to a significant degree, is the increasing centrality of NGOs and NGO employment to local economies in many parts of South Sudan, as discussed in the previous chapter. It represents a reminder of how closely intertwined South Sudan's NGO boom is with the transformation of its economy, including the rapidly expanding reliance on money and on waged labour, as well as vast unemployment. In this context, creating employment opportunities for others – whose salaries would then support extended families, and put money into local economies – was often narrated as an important motivation for establishing an organisation.

In addition, while some interlocutors recounted with frustration how their organisations felt like a 'training ground' for international NGOs, for others, the number of former staff now working with international organisations was a source of pride. The director of a well-established regional NGO, that has been operating for around two decades, argued that a key contribution of his organisation is that they provide employment and training opportunities to young people in the area; the organisation is *"actually a capacity building institution"*, because, he says,

¹³² Interview, 15 November 2021 (a)

¹³³ Interview, 19 August 2019 (d)

an international, UN agency, will not accept someone that did not have experience, you know? But for us here we can say okay, let's give time for this person, because after all, there is no school where you can get experience, until you are given an opportunity to do work. So, we wish to take someone without all those number of years of experience, and by the time this person catch up, there is turnover, now they begin to run to these luxurious [international organisations], but we feel we are doing something in terms of capacity building.

Plus, he says, “also, in terms of employment, like [name of the organisation], this year, we have about 75 permanent staff that we are employing and a number of volunteers that are there”.¹³⁴ Staff are paid in dollars, and volunteers receive between 50 and 100 USD per month.

A similar view was expressed by an interviewee from a very different, much smaller organisation. He was the current director of a membership-based organisation, founded around 20 years ago by a group of students returning to the area after studying in northern Sudan, and engaged primarily in activism for peace and in community development projects. For its core functions, the organisation primarily relies on members’ subscription fees, though in the context of South Sudan’s economic crisis, members have been struggling to pay and most contribute only intermittently. Partly because of this, they have registered as a national NGO, and occasionally implement projects for international and national organisations; they aim for at least one funded project a year, which, if it comes with overhead, can help to pay the rent. This has enabled them to expand their activities; in the director’s view, “we’re doing better than when we were a group... The subscription, the monthly contribution, is what we were relying on and then the well-wishers, and you don’t expect that much every time. So the activities were limited, it is only like social gathering.” In this way, they have managed to “keep the organization active”, running a mix of small, regular activities that require few resources, and intermittent, larger, funded projects. The staff operate mostly as volunteers, with occasional funding, apart from the supporting staff – the security guard and cleaner – who are paid from membership contributions. The director is appointed by the board, who, in turn, are elected from the organisation’s general assembly. When they have funded projects, they involve members in implementing these. In this way, he says, through the organisation, “many youths were trained, and now they’re working in international organisations”. Because of this, he says, “I’m happy. I got a lot of offers to work with international NGOs, but I’m very happy that I’m here in this place”; this, he says, is because he is “producing”: by which he means that there are young people who are now working in national and international NGOs, but, he says, “they were trained from here, finance, projects,

¹³⁴ Interview, 10 November 2021 (b)

programmes and all these things... that's why I say I am producing!" He contrasts this to bigger NGOs that, when they are hiring, want *"the finished goods, those who are qualified, experienced, no mistakes."*¹³⁵

This, in a way, is part of the same story as the discussions in the first part of this chapter; it resonates with representations of South Sudanese NGOs as presenting opportunities for learning, and as, potentially, a stepping stone to better paid work within international organisations. It reflects the position of domestic NGOs in South Sudan's humanitarian arena; as subcontractors to international organisations but unable to offer the same wages, they offer people opportunities to gain experience of internationally funded projects, and are generally seen as more accessible than international organisations. They often struggle with high staff turnover; some saw this as an opportunity rather than a challenge, but others pointed to considerable stress that this placed on directors and senior managers who felt that they bore the burden of constantly training new staff, as those they had trained moved on to international organisations (and international organisations, in turn, criticised their lack of 'capacity'). One interviewee, an older man running a small, sub-nationally based NGO in Unity State, said, of South Sudanese NGOs, including his own, that *"it is a training ground, you know, for new graduates and new staff, which after experience, they go."* It was difficult to retain staff when you could pay them *"500 [dollars], 800 maximum"*, while their colleagues and friends employed by international organisations were earning *"1500, 2000"*; they will leave, and you will *"every time keep recruiting new"*.¹³⁶ Another interlocutor, a woman running a small, long-standing women's rights organisation, commented wryly, when we were chatting at the beginning of an interview, that international organisations *"take [staff] from national NGOs, strengthen themselves and then say we have no capacity"*.¹³⁷

Another interlocutor was a man in his 50s, who had been hired by a national NGO to coordinate one of their sub-national offices. He was the most senior staff member for the organisation in the local area. By the time we first met, he had worked for the organisation for several years. There were many things he enjoyed about his role, but it also entailed a significant amount of stress. Staff turnover is high, which increases the burden on him as a manager; several staff members had recently moved to one international organisation, operating locally. He says, *"our organisation became like a transit area, where you come, get training, people [in international organisations] get to know you, then you jump to another bigger organisation. So, I became just a trainer... my standard will always go lower because I will keep on always training for transit then they go. Then I find myself, I cannot progress."* In

¹³⁵ Interview, 3 December 2021 (a)

¹³⁶ Interview, 27 October 2021

¹³⁷ Fieldnotes, June 2019

this way, he feels, international organisations are “*limiting us in another way*”. As a result, he says, “*most of the time the burden of the work is on me, stressing me... because I don’t need the organisation to fail, I need to keep the standard.*” Instead, he says, “*you that is having that passion will always be the sacrificing person, and this is not good for the health*”. He was unwilling to leave, though he, too, had been offered other jobs, noting, “*I don’t like jumping from one organisation to another... I have not to jump out because [the organisation] is failing. Even if it is failing, that is when I will say, no, let me stay and make sure that it will stand. That is even why I am a part of this.*” Nonetheless, he says, “*I cannot take all this burden for so long... next time you come, you may not find me [at this organisation], you may know yes, this is because of this. I am not a machine.*”¹³⁸

All this is of course also intimately linked to questions around the distribution of employment in South Sudan, between different regions and communities, a fraught and contentious topic about which interlocutors had varied opinions. Many of those that emphasised their own role as a ‘capacity building’ institution for local youth, for example, also expressed frustrations about national and international organisations that did not primarily hire local people for their programmes, but rather ‘brought’ people from Juba. It is another reminder of the sensitive and complex position of NGOs in South Sudan’s unequal political economy, and of the potential for the reification of inequalities. As one interviewee, the former chair of a community-based organisation, currently working intermittently as a consultant, explained, “*local organisations are also income generating organisations*”, in part because of the jobs they bring to local areas. This has a multiplier effect; people gain experience of working for NGOs, and, as a result “*they will have the skills to compete for jobs in other places*”, including in well-paying international organisations. In this way, organisations can also reinforce inequalities between different regions and communities, because “*not every community has someone who is prominent, who has created an organization*”, and those without can be easily “*left behind*”.¹³⁹ These accounts return us to the ambivalence of NGOs: forming an NGO can be a central way of channelling resources, services and employment to a particular area, but can – in doing so – also be imbricated in the reproduction of South Sudan’s deep-rooted spatial inequalities.

6.5. Class, capital and connections

Interlocutors emphasised that establishing and running an organisation required considerable personal commitment, sacrifice and perseverance. Yet, as the accounts above indicate, it also

¹³⁸ Interview, 26 February 2020

¹³⁹ Interview, 5 November 2021 (b)

requires significant economic, social and cultural capital, reflected in the fact that many of the interviewees above – particularly those running larger organisations, and that received funding from international organisations – had at least some economic capital to invest in an organisation, and had often previously worked for international organisations. This is of course not the case for the vast majority of South Sudan’s citizens. Some engagement with this is integral to understanding the ways in which South Sudan’s NGO sector is bound up with processes of class stratification and growing inequality, as discussed in the previous chapter. This demands attention to the ‘conditions of possibility’ (Liechty, 2012, cited in Spronk, 2020) that enable some people to succeed in the NGO sphere, and to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the NGO form to seek change in their own lives and the lives of others. This, in turn, enables us to see how the narratives of individual agency, motivation and commitment in the above sections take shape “*as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of culturally constituted feelings, thoughts and conditions of possibility*”, in ways that are intimately interconnected to, and act on and are acted upon by, larger political-economic structures (Spronk, 2020: 473).

These conditions of possibility are not static, but rather have changed over time as South Sudan’s economy has contracted, and its NGO arena has become more competitive. Succeeding in the NGO sphere – in the sense of establishing, sustaining, and securing funding for an organisation – requires existing economic capital, often derived from savings from past employment in international agencies; social capital, including connections with individuals within international and other South Sudanese organisations; and cultural capital, including a relatively high level of formal education and proficiency in English, as well as an intimate knowledge of the processes and systems of international organisations, and of their internal cultures and ways of working. This includes a familiarity with the social norms of international organisations, including how to navigate the cluster system, and how to socialise and network with prospective donors, which came, often, from past work in international organisations rather than formal education. In other words, it requires an intimate “*feel for the game*” (Bourdieu, 1998) which, in this case, is often forged through past employment with international agencies. Getting an organisation off the ground without this was not impossible – South Sudanese NGOs have highly varied structures, histories and trajectories, and there are plenty of organisations whose founders are *not* the former staff of international organisations – but it was certainly a significant trend, particularly amongst South Sudan’s larger domestic NGOs, and amongst many of those that are receiving resources from the international humanitarian system.

Political connections and capital could play a role (and certainly an NGO that was openly critical of the government would quickly run into difficulty), but being seen to be too close to the political sphere could also be a risk, making this more of a fragile balance. In a context in which the government is internationally de-legitimised, being too visibly connected to senior politicians could undermine one's legitimacy in the eyes of prospective donors. Aside from this, connections to politicians could be a risk in South Sudan's turbulent political arena, particularly if one came to be seen as associated with one group or another.¹⁴⁰ In this context, personal histories of boundary crossing (Lewis, 2008a) between governmental and non-governmental spheres (in political roles, rather than as civil servants) could be a liability rather than a strength. However, social capital in the form of connections with individuals running established South Sudanese NGOs was often helpful, including through sharing advice, contacts, and office space, amongst other things; indeed, although interlocutors often argued that the South Sudanese NGO sphere was very competitive, there were also many examples of collaboration and mutual support between organisations.

Economic capital was often crucial. NGOs were often established either using founders' individual savings, or contributions from a group. One interviewee, for example, is an older man who had volunteered and worked for many years as a teacher before becoming involved in humanitarian work through the church in the 1990s. He worked for several years for a South Sudanese, church-linked organisation, and then briefly for an international organisation, before establishing an NGO in the mid-2000s. He recounts,

It was difficult, and it is still difficult, because the national organisations, when you start it with like, it is taking from you. You are the one sponsoring the establishment. You have to use your own money to do that... Like registration, printing of papers, development of logos, all of this, even getting initial people to help you, sometimes they come in the form of volunteers but they are expecting at least transport, at least something to eat while they are doing it, and that has nowhere to come from, it has to come from the pocket of the director, who is you. And I have spent a lot of money really to bring this up. Many other national NGOs who have come up, they have to sponsor it themselves especially at the stage of establishment.

¹⁴⁰ As one interviewee reflected, for example: "you distance yourself from these politicians, because if they see you moving with one of them, or visiting the house of one of them, they will see as if you are the part of that person, in case anything happened to that person, also they will be looking for you." (Interview, 9 November 2021 (b)). In addition, as noted in chapter four, although political capital and influence could be gained through service provision, this could also create risks for particular founders and directors, if they came to be seen as a threat to local politicians.

At the same time, he continues,

*If you compare the cost of money and the cost of time sacrificed to do this, usually the cost of your time is more even. Because you take this work to your home, you do it in your rest time, you do it on Sunday, because you want it to come up. So it is taking a lot, a lot of time, a lot of thinking. You pay visit to people that you think can contribute, you waste transport, you waste time waiting for them to agree to sit with you, you can't estimate that one using that one. ... But at least sometimes you use physical money to print papers, to develop a logo, to hire somebody, to register organisation, to pay for transport, to pay for lunch for people that you have invited to talk to you, things like that.*¹⁴¹

This account highlights the significant financial resources that go into setting up an organisation. It also points to the role of social capital – having people to visit, to talk to, to take to lunch, who may be able to help – and reiterates the narrative of sacrifice and commitment discussed in the previous section. Another interlocutor, a young man who had recently set up an environment-focused NGO in Juba, recounted his experiences in similar terms. He grew up in a refugee camp in a neighbouring country, returning to South Sudan as a young adult after completing secondary school. He began working as a driver for an international NGO, while studying for a certificate in project planning and management, and then worked for a small international company that was acting as a contractor to an international organisation. He then bought a car and worked as a taxi driver. He set up the organisation first as a CBO, operating in his neighbourhood in Juba, before registering as an NGO two years later. He used his savings and his earnings as a taxi driver, because “*if you're initiating something, you need capital... You need a lawyer to be able to come up with the constitution, you need to take it for registration, to RRC... So, it became very difficult, to an extent that, I had no more savings, my savings were just flowing into the CBO.*”¹⁴²

Others pooled resources as a group, or received support from friends. One interviewee, for example, the founder and director of a mid-sized women's rights organisation in Juba, had worked for an international NGO in Juba for four years. During this period, she had been using part of her salary to provide funding to women's savings groups in her neighbourhood in Juba, which they would use to set up small businesses. Working with a local community leader, in this way, she supported ten savings groups, each with ten members. Eventually, she resigned from her job in order to establish a new organisation, wanting to support women in South Sudan in a

¹⁴¹ Interview, 21 March 2020

¹⁴² Interview, 12 November 2021 (b)

more sustainable way. She persuaded a group of friends, all ‘well-off’ South Sudanese women living in Juba and either working for international NGOs or running businesses, to support the organisation as board members, and to contribute seed money. They used this money to rent an office, buy furniture, hire staff, buy tailoring machines and other equipment, and to begin providing training for women in tailoring, craft-making and soap-making. She began writing proposals, but was very selective about what she applied for, not wanting to be pulled away from the objectives of the organisation. After two years, they received their first grant from an international NGO. From there, she reflects, *“we also became so active in the forums, clusters”*, she and the programme manager would *“run around the town, moving around, for visibility purpose, our intention was, people should know that we are existing. And then we are selling our ideas. So that is how we moved on then.”*¹⁴³ The organisation has since received further funding. Again, this highlights the role of financial resources, of social capital, and of knowledge of the norms and systems of the international humanitarian industry, including the centrality of the cluster system for an organisation seeking funds.

Indeed, perhaps more important than having material resources to invest in the organisation was having connections within and an intimate knowledge of the international humanitarian system. One interviewee, who had established an NGO in a town in the south-east of the country in 2013, was well-connected through his previous work in a senior position in a national NGO, where he had worked for almost two decades; as a result, he says, when he founded the organisation, *“I was lucky, we are very, very lucky to start just because of my previous knowledge, relationship, and exposure. Because every office I went to, I found people I knew.”* The organisation was founded in a town outside the capital, but established a presence in Juba within the first year, because they knew that, *“to grow this organisation... it needed to be at the centre of everything”*. The organisation’s growth was, in the director’s words, *“astronomic”*; he attributes this to the outbreak of conflict, to the confidence people had in him from his previous place of work, and to the *“professionalism”* the organisation demonstrated. Crucially, the organisation was also careful about which funds they applied for, avoiding short-term funding where they would have to operate very quickly and risk making mistakes, for which *“no-one will forgive you, they will penalize you and strike you hard with that”*. Instead, they prioritised medium- and longer-term work, to ensure it was *“well-programmed”*.¹⁴⁴ This, again, is illustrative of the value of an intimate knowledge of the humanitarian system: he

¹⁴³ Interview, 28 October 2021 (b)

¹⁴⁴ Interview, 12 November 2021 (a)

recognised that developing a reputation as a trustworthy and reliable partner was critical, and so was strategic about the work they undertook.

Another interviewee, the director of a large, Juba-based national NGO founded around the time of South Sudan's independence, had previously worked for three UN agencies and an international NGO. When the organisation was founded, first, he and the board together agreed a name, logo, constitution and profile, as well as thematic areas of work, before registering it as an NGO. The founder then used his networks from the international NGO he had been working for to build connections within the cluster system, leading to the organisation's first funding, a small project from a UN agency, to be implemented in the south of the country, in a location where they had already recruited volunteers. Once they got the funding, they had to "*make sure our house is in order, the due diligence*";¹⁴⁵ ensuring the organisation's structure was solid and that the project was implemented well. The UN agency recommended them to other donors, and the organisation grew quickly, now receiving significant funding from several UN agencies and international NGOs.

In these latter two examples, the organisations grew very fast, now turning over more than a million dollars a year in funding. In cases such as these, founders and directors almost always had significant experience of working within international organisations; they were well-connected, based in the capital, and very well-versed in the language and practices of international organisations, as well as having access to financial capital to invest in the organisation. Without this, securing funding is not impossible, but it is harder. In addition, in each example, interlocutors invested in and prioritised building internal systems, ensuring they could meet donors' due diligence requirements and that they performed well in evaluations and audits; their past experience within international organisations helped significantly in understanding how to navigate these requirements.

My argument is not that this is the route taken by all NGOs. Rather, it is that this is the route for many of South Sudan's largest NGOs – those that have been most successful in securing resources from the international humanitarian system. The point is that accessing resources from the international system requires a significant degree of know-how, social capital and connections, often gleaned from years of working within these same organisations. There are many smaller organisations, with long histories in particular areas, that are struggling to access

¹⁴⁵ Interview, 19 October 2021 (a)

funds as the national NGO arena because more competitive. This is the case, particularly, for organisations whose directors are less confident in English, less well connected within South Sudan's humanitarian industry, and have less experience of navigating the internal systems of international organisations, as well as those based outside Juba and, to a lesser extent, other state capitals.

6.6. Conclusion

The narratives discussed here point to the complexity of motivations for moving between organisations, in which salaries are one part of the picture, but so, too, are impressions of organisational culture, and experiences of and frustrations with hierarchies and inequalities within organisations. They also highlight the extent to which 'international' and 'South Sudanese' organisations – treated as distinct categories both in South Sudanese law and in the categorisation schema of the international humanitarian industry – are connected through the career trajectories of their founders and staff.

In some ways the frequency of movement of personnel between international and domestic organisations is indicative of the extent to which South Sudanese NGOs – with varied histories, structures and aims – are intertwined with the aid industry in South Sudan, forming part of one wider field of employment. South Sudanese NGOs – typically with lower salaries, and lower entry requirements – offer opportunities for young graduates to gain experience before moving into better-paid roles in international organisations. This leads to frustrations amongst senior staff about their organisations being a 'transit area' or 'training ground' for international organisations, which, in turn, makes the narrative that South Sudanese NGOs 'lack capacity' particularly galling. However, some NGO directors explicitly envisioned their organisations as a space where young graduates could gain experience before moving on to better paying jobs, all of which would help bring employment and resources into local communities.

At the same time, working for or founding a South Sudanese NGO could be a form of resistance to the hierarchies of the humanitarian industry, to the constraints placed on and felt by national staff, and to one's position within the 'implementariat'. Some staff members had decided not to apply for, or had left, roles with international organisations, expressing a preference for employment with local or national organisations which provided opportunities for more 'hands-on' work, to work more closely with the communities at the 'grassroots', or to do work they felt to be more impactful. Many interlocutors, including those that had moved from

roles in national to international organisations, emphasised the opportunities they had had in the former to learn and grow. More broadly, a significant theme within interlocutors' accounts was of frustration around their lack of influence within international organisations, and a sense that their ideas and input were not being taken seriously. This highlights the persistence of national and racialised hierarchies and inequalities within international organisations (c.f. James, 2020; Sundberg, 2019; Roth, 2015; Pascucci, 2019; Ong & Combinido, 2018), which were keenly felt by interlocutors. Founding, or, to a lesser extent, working for a national organisation was one way of navigating these hierarchies, of carving out a greater space from which to exercise agency and control over one's work, and of attaining a higher level of responsibility. At the same time, interlocutors often found that, even as directors of an organisation, they were heavily constrained in what they were able to do; this is a central paradox, to which I return in the next chapter.

The narratives of learning, individual responsibility and personal growth that are evident in the accounts above resonate with Roth's argument that aidwork epitomises some aspects of work in contemporary neoliberal societies, not only in terms of the demands it places on workers and the insecure, short-term and projectized nature of employment (discussed in the next chapter), but also in that aid workers have an 'entrepreneurial self' (Roth, 2015: 62). In Roth's interviews, aspirations to engage in aidwork often related to ideas of self-realisation, personal growth and professional fulfilment, with "*the desire to learn and be challenged... at least as important as the wish to make a difference*" (Roth, 2015: 151). Similarly, the narratives above often reflect what Wacquant (2010: 213) describes as the "*trope of individual responsibility*", linked to a fashioning of the self around the model of the entrepreneur, which is a centrepiece of the neoliberal 'Leviathan' (Wacquant, 2010, 2012). Themes of hard work, commitment, sacrifice and self-optimisation broadly conform to these neoliberal ideals and subjectivities (Nehring & Röcke, 2023; Trinh, 2022), reflecting a neoliberal ethos that attributes success or failure to individual efforts, entrepreneurialism and personal drive, rather than structural and systemic advantages and inequalities, including class hierarchies (Harvey, 2005), though somewhat tempering this perspective is that interlocutors often reflected on their own privilege relative to others, particularly in terms of access to education and employment, and positioned this as an important driver in their own motivations; a way of 'paying back' to the community the advantages they had enjoyed. In addition, their emphasis on accountability, fiscal responsibility and proper financial management – as well as on the immense importance placed on performance in audits – interlocutors' accounts reflected the ethos of managerialism and 'audit cultures' that pervade

the humanitarian industry (Roth, 2015b; Vannier, 2010), recognised by anthropologists as a technique of neoliberal governmentality (Shore & Wright, 2000).

7. Between Precarious Contracts and Moral Aspirations: Subcontracted Employment in the Humanitarian Industry

7.1. Chapter introduction

This chapter explores the nature of work within South Sudanese NGOs. There are many ways in which this could be discussed, but I focus here on a particular structural, systemic point: that, often, this represents a form of ‘subcontracted employment’ (Wills, 2009), in which the staff of South Sudanese NGOs undertake work on behalf of international organisations, who shape, to a significant extent, the nature of the work they do and the terms of their employment. As set out in the introduction, I focus on the precarity of labour, drawing on Pascucci’s definition of precarity as *“experiences of work marked by uncertainty, insecure and diminishing material conditions and (partially) unacknowledged performances of care and affective labour”* (2019: 746). In South Sudanese NGO work, precarity is manifested in exposure to physical risk, in unpredictable, short-term contracts and intermittent salaries, and in relatively poorly remunerated but physically and emotionally demanding work. Building on the observations of previous chapters, this chapter also highlights the heterogeneity of experiences, positionalities and perspectives of those working in South Sudanese NGOs and seeks to draw out how different actors approach and navigate these challenges.

This chapter begins by briefly revisiting the ‘will to localise’ in South Sudan, exploring recent discourses around ‘localisation’ in South Sudan’s humanitarian arena. It shows that, despite a significant upsurge in rhetoric around localisation, growing numbers of South Sudanese NGOs, and reliance on these actors to deliver aid in ‘hard-to-reach’ areas, direct funding to South Sudanese NGOs has barely changed since 2016. Instead, the incorporation of South Sudanese NGOs into the international humanitarian system overwhelmingly takes the form of subcontracting, often on relatively short-term, intermittent and prescriptive contracts.

The chapter then examines the way in which the pervasiveness of the subcontracted project shapes the nature of work within these organisations. It considers the ways in which South Sudanese NGO work might be considered a form of subcontracted employment (Wills, 2009), with South Sudanese NGOs offering a form of ‘just-in-time’ staffing to international organisations. In this way, the chapter speaks to a wider body of literature exploring the effects of trends towards the flexibilization and casualisation of labour in the aid industry, and the prevalence of short-term, temporary employment contracts (Hindman & Fechter, 2011; Roth,

2015b), contributing to pressures around self-optimisation discussed in previous chapters. The chapter also points to the uncertainty of employment that is directly shaped by decisions (including cuts to aid, or reprioritisation exercises) made far from South Sudan.

In part because of the design of the wider research, the chapter relies heavily (though not entirely) on the perspectives and experiences of those individuals running and working for South Sudanese NGOs. The individuals I interviewed within international organisations were not necessarily the ones with decision-making power over subcontracts for South Sudanese NGOs. I have sought to mitigate this by closely reading and drawing upon several reports that involved key informant interviews with staff of international NGOs and UN agencies in South Sudan. Hamsik (2019), for example, very usefully shows how global trends towards zero risk tolerance amongst donors place intense pressures upon operational partners, including international intermediaries, which in turn shapes their approaches to partnering in various ways. The politics, pressures, policies and practices shaping the subcontract from the perspective of international organisations in South Sudan could be usefully explored through further research.

7.2. Revisiting the will to localise in South Sudan

As discussed in chapter three, international intervenors in South Sudan have long sought, in various ways, to ‘localise’ their authority, engaging and contracting with local actors in their efforts to foster legitimacy, cut costs and navigate South(ern) Sudan’s geographic scale and social complexity. Most recently, for well over 30 years, international humanitarian agencies have explicitly sought to work with and through South Sudanese organisations in order to navigate the challenges of delivering aid in a context of conflict and to reduce costs. They have sought to promote ‘resilience’ and ‘strengthen’ civil society, and to ‘build’ the capacity of South Sudanese organisations to implement internationally funded programmes through an array of different initiatives. This has played a significant role in the emergence of the South Sudanese NGO sector. At the same time, the South Sudanese NGO sector is not a straightforward creation of the international humanitarian industry, but rather has been shaped by a complex array of political, historic and economic forces, and by the manifold aspirations and motivations of an array of South Sudanese actors.

Recent debates around ‘localisation’ in South Sudan contain clear echoes of these long-standing discourses. Since 2013, as seen in chapter four, conflict and humanitarian access constraints have created opportunities for South Sudanese NGOs to grow, to access funding and resources and

to play an increasingly prominent role within the international humanitarian apparatus in South Sudan. In several studies, access is cited by key informants in international NGOs and UN agencies as a key reason to work with and through South Sudanese organisations (Ali et al., 2018; Hamsik, 2019; Tanner & Moro, 2016). For example, Tanner and Moro (2016: 19) write that *“the vast majority of international agencies interviewed for this research cited access as a reason to work through local partners”*. Similarly, Ali et al., citing key informant interviews with UN agencies and INGOs, write that South Sudanese NGOs *“are receiving increased amounts of funding via intermediaries as they are able to work in hard-to-reach communities”* (Ali et al., 2018: 9), and note that there is *“a sense from NNGOs that they are used for ‘gap filling’ when INGOs have been evacuated, or when the risk of insecurity is too high for INGOs/UN agencies”* (ibid: 11), and that they are expected to accept higher levels of risk. This trend has continued in more recent years: Mena and Hilhorst (2022: 13), for example, write that *“local and national NGOs are the main actors involved in delivering assistance in areas directly affected by conflict or disaster and in remote areas”*, representing an ‘outsourcing’ of risk and leaving these actors feeling that they are being *“used for the ‘hard and dangerous tasks’ without being given the space to obtain significant grants”* (ibid: 13; see also CAFOD & Development Initiatives, 2023).

Humanitarian access is both a complex issue and a prominent concern in South Sudan, where ongoing conflict, insecurity, flooding and poor infrastructure all pose limits to the delivery of aid. Even prior to the post-2013 conflict, aid was often concentrated in easy-to-reach places (Sørbo et al., 2016), including towns. After 2013, the UN POC sites, to which many tens of thousands of people had fled, became the initial focus of the humanitarian response because they were easier and safer to operate in, despite hosting only a small portion of those affected (Stoddard et al., 2017); Stoddard et al. described, at the time of their research, an ongoing ‘access inertia’, as well as perceptions amongst affected populations of a declining aid presence. Mena and Hilhorst, more recently, have pointed to the prominent role of path dependency in shaping access to aid in South Sudan, with decisions *“largely informed by the history of interventions – not only by the analysis of current needs”*; in part, because of the difficulties of establishing a presence and projects in new locations (Mena & Hilhorst, 2022: 11). Insecurity often leads international organisations to reduce their presence, providing assistance in easier-to-access areas (IFRC, 2018): an analysis of humanitarian presence in South Sudan in 2018 highlighted that some of the areas with emergency levels of acute food insecurity (the phase before famine on the Integrated Phase Classification scale) had the lowest presence of aid actors (ibid). In sum, reaching those most in need of humanitarian assistance, as well as ensuring aid does not exacerbate inequalities, or dynamics of marginalisation and alienation, is an immensely challenging task, navigated in a

context of ongoing conflict and insecurity. As one interviewee, a former NGO director and now consultant, who had worked for and with numerous organisations, pointed out:

When you set criteria for selection of a place where you have to work, you need to be sensitive to the idea that you could be isolating other communities as a result. If you are looking for an airstrip, you're already marginalizing those communities that do not have airstrips. When you're considering that you have to have a local NGO or another NGO compound for you to accommodate in, you are already marginalizing certain communities. When you are saying is there enough presence of government in the area, so that we are protected, you are already marginalizing certain communities. When you're saying, you know, how far away are they from Juba, you are already marginalising some.¹⁴⁶

Since 2013, South Sudanese NGOs have helped expand the coverage of the humanitarian response, ensuring that aid reaches people in more remote and conflict-affected areas, with their staff often taking significant risks to do so (see, *inter alia*, Tanner & Moro, 2016; Hamsik, 2019; Howe et al., 2019). South Sudanese NGOs often provide 'last-mile' services, and work in some of the areas viewed as 'hardest-to-reach' (Hamsik, 2019). For some interviewees, remaining alongside communities during periods of crisis was viewed as a moral imperative. This was seen, for example, in the account of one man, an employee of a national NGO, based in their sub-office in his home area. This is an area that has seen intense fighting since 2013, including after the 2018 peace agreement. He reflected how, multiple times, he had been displaced alongside the community:

We decided to stay with the community, we face the challenges together... you know, there was a lot of fighting by then. So, when fighting comes, we could run with the families, with the communities, to the swamps, to the bushes there. Then when the attacks goes back, we come out, we settle again. So, we face all those challenges together with the family, with the communities... We went through many things. I think because the area is ours. And the people are our people. So, we do everything, when we are among them, we don't feel like strangers.¹⁴⁷

Tanner and Moro (2016) describe similar instances of national NGOs and local organisations, including churches, maintaining or ensuring the delivery of aid during periods of conflict and displacement. Interlocutors from within South Sudanese NGOs often identified differences in

¹⁴⁶ Interview, 5 November 2021 (b)

¹⁴⁷ Interview, 18 September 2022

risk tolerance as a major difference between international and national NGOs, contrasting the perceived risk aversion of international NGOs to the willingness to ‘stay and deliver’ (Egeland et al., 2011) of South Sudanese organisations. Others emphasised their ability to reach more remote, rural locations. However, the day-to-day realities of humanitarian access are complicated, in South Sudan as elsewhere, varying from place to place, and from organisation to organisation, and influenced by many different factors. Hamsik, for example, notes that the narrative that local and national NGOs have better access is true in specific areas, but not necessarily in others; and, more generally, ‘better access’ is often conflated with *“a partner’s willingness to accept significant risk”* (Hamsik, 2019: 11). Risks of course are not felt equally by all members of an organisation, and some are more able than others to reduce their risks of working in conflict areas (Mena & Hilhorst, 2022).

This situation, as numerous studies have pointed out, leads to a significant transferral or outsourcing of risk to South Sudanese NGOs (Atim, 2022; Mena & Hilhorst, 2022; Moro et al., 2020), an issue also discussed in the wider humanitarian industry, beyond South Sudan (see, *inter alia*, Egeland et al., 2011; Stoddard et al., 2010; Barbelet et al., 2021). It reflects what Barter and Sumlut (2022) describe as the ‘conflict paradox’, in which armed conflict and resulting access constraints create opportunities for local and national humanitarian actors to advance localisation, but also relegate these actors to working disproportionately in the most challenging contexts. It also bears a clear parallel to the situation in the 1990s, discussed in chapter three, when insecurity in southern Sudan and growing risk aversion amongst international organisations had similarly led to a search for local subcontractors, and to a significant emphasis on ‘capacity building’ (Rolandsen, 2005).

These risks are exacerbated by a lack of funding and support, and by pressure on South Sudanese NGOs to keep costs low (Ali et al., 2018; Atim, 2022; Hamsik, 2019). This relates to another common discourse around and rationale for ‘localisation’, which is that South Sudanese NGOs will deliver aid more cheaply. Hamsik (2019: 4), drawing on research in South Sudan and Nigeria, concluded that *“in practice, localization is viewed by many donor and UN officials as a vehicle for more cost-effective programming”*; in both contexts, she said, donors and UN agencies *“described how localization can drive efficiency and produce greater value for money”* (ibid: 13). In their study, Tanner and Moro found questions of relative cost-efficiency to be a *“particular source of tension between national and international actors”*; South Sudanese NGOs emphasised their *“vastly lower salaries and overheads”*, as well as expressing frustration about being *“expected to do the same work without comparable payment”*

(Tanner and Moro, 2016: 17). This is not unique to South Sudan: as discussed in the introduction, arguments related to cost-efficiency played an important role in securing consensus around ‘localisation’ at the World Humanitarian Summit and are central to the framing of the Grand Bargain. In their literature review, Barbelet et al. point out that localisation is often described as a driver of cost-efficiency, but that no comprehensive research has been carried out to support this; and, crucially, that the ‘value for money’ justification for localisation “*results in perverse incentives to keep costs low, leading to compromises in safety, quality and sustainability*” (Barbelet et al., 2021: 44). Hamsik (2019) raises a similar concern in relation to South Sudan specifically, noting that pressure to be low-cost distorts the real cost of working safely and effectively.

Since the 2016 WHS (introduced in section 1.5), rhetoric around ‘localisation’ in South Sudan’s humanitarian arena has grown significantly. In the wake of the Summit, there was a flurry of activity around localisation in South Sudan. Several international NGOs launched projects related to localisation in the country (see, *inter alia*, Abraha et al., 2022; CARE et al., 2019a; Wilkinson et al., 2020). Localisation also became a prominent topic within humanitarian coordination groups, and several clusters began to actively promote localisation in South Sudan. The Global Protection Cluster, for example, piloted a ‘localisation initiative’ in South Sudan (Global Protection Cluster, 2018; Nolan & Dozin, 2018). The 2018 Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) for South Sudan stated an intention to “*promote partnerships and collaboration among international, national and local organizations to further localize the response as per World Humanitarian Summit outcomes*” (UN OCHA, 2017: 11), while the 2019 HRP commits to increase the involvement of South Sudanese NGOs across the response, including through trainings, mentorship and regular capacity assessment, NNGO leadership of clusters and working groups, and funding (UN OCHA, 2018a). Numerous fora for discussion of localisation in South Sudan have been initiated, including a Grand Bargain National Reference Group¹⁴⁸ and a C4C South Sudan Working Group.¹⁴⁹

At the time of my research, there was significant engagement with the topic of localisation amongst interviewees from a wide range of South Sudanese NGOs. Many had heard of the

¹⁴⁸ NRGs were proposed as part of the Grand Bargain 2.0 framework, and first established in 2022. They are intended to be national-level, consultative forums to promote action around the Grand Bargain, led by local and national actors. See <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-official-website/guidance-note-national-reference-groups-ara-en-es-fr-indonesian-0> (accessed 15.3.2023).

¹⁴⁹ These form part of efforts to convene local and national actors to shape and champion localisation in their specific contexts; see, e.g. <https://charter4change.files.wordpress.com/2022/03/c4c-communique-2022-from-global-meeting.pdf> (accessed 15.3.2023).

Grand Bargain; the 25% funding commitment was particularly well-known, generally interpreted to mean that donors would substantially increase their direct funding to South Sudanese NGOs. 74 South Sudanese NGOs have endorsed the Charter for Change.¹⁵⁰ Overall, there was a broad perception amongst interlocutors that localisation had become a prominent and popular topic in South Sudan's humanitarian arena, in a way that it had not been before. Similar themes have emerged from other studies, pointing to rapidly growing engagement with the localisation discourse amongst international and national NGOs in South Sudan (Ali et al., 2018; CARE et al., 2019b).

There appears to be substantial pressure on international intermediaries, including from donors, to signal their engagement with the 'localisation' agenda, and to include South Sudanese NGOs on proposals. This has led to a flurry of efforts by international organisations, including some who have traditionally implemented projects directly, to initiate new contracting arrangements with South Sudanese NGOs. One 2018 study in South Sudan, for instance, noted that “*every international agency interviewed*” was trying to increase funding to national NGOs (NNGOs), but that was not well planned or coordinated, with “*little evidence of explicit transition planning to NNGOs*” (Ali et al., 2018: vii). A South Sudanese staff member of an international NGO reflected,

The international actors are feeling the pressure. They feel the pressure that if they don't change their way of doing business, with time, they may be irrelevant. And that's why now you can see a number of traditional NGOs that work in communities directly are now attempting to bring on partners, at least to show that they also work with local actors. And within the donors, there are already some donors that have, if they have not put as a precondition in the calls for proposal, they put extra weight for proposals that brings in national actors. For me, all these are kind of really practical and visible impact of the talking and the push that has been done.

At the same time, the overwhelming sense amongst interviewees was that this growing rhetoric around localisation had led to few meaningful changes for their own organisations, or for the wider balance of power in South Sudan's humanitarian arena. Rather, 'localisation' in South Sudan thus far appears primarily to take the form of greater subcontracting, enfolding South Sudanese organisations more closely into the international humanitarian system without changing the way this system operates. This is a shift that has primarily benefited large, well-

¹⁵⁰ <https://charter4change.org/endorsements/> (accessed 12.12.2023)

established, Juba-based NGOs, those fluent in English and at ease in coordination fora, who are most visible to international organisations and who, with a track record of successfully implemented projects and audited reports, are most likely to be able to meet donors' compliance and reporting requirements with the least risk to intermediaries. One interviewee, the director of a mid-sized, national NGO with a specific regional focus, argued, for example, that he felt *"localisation is just used for attracting donor funding, to be honest. Because sometimes it is a criteria, donors want you to apply with a local NGO."*¹⁵¹

The gulf between the prominent and high-profile rhetoric around 'localisation' and the sense that little has changed in practice has catalysed a significant amount of frustration, disillusionment and mistrust. I heard repeatedly that localisation was a 'song': something international organisations were singing, but without significantly changing the way in which they worked. One interviewee, who has worked for aid organisations in South Sudan for more than two decades, and who is now the director of a large national NGO, explained why he had decided to extricate himself from forums where 'localisation' was being discussed. He had been previously very involved in advocating for localisation, both within South Sudan and in international fora. However, now, he says,

*The concept of localisation in South Sudan has been captured by international NGOs. [Names of international organisations], have captured this concept, and now they are the ones spearheading this initiative in South Sudan. How? How? How do you champion localisation, when actually you will compete with them? So, it doesn't make sense. Actually, for that reason, I have even not bothered these days, I don't attend the localisation meetings. I am a member, but I, I don't see anything, because you can see they talk and talk and talk, waste too much time, in the end, you don't see anything.*¹⁵²

His account, and others like it, point to the significant mistrust generated by the failure to match grand promises with significant change, something also observed by Roepstorff (2022) in Bangladesh. A recent Peer2Peer review of the humanitarian response in South Sudan pointed to a *"massive gap in perception"* about the quality of cooperation between international actors and South Sudanese NGOs (IASC, 2022). International organisations, the review states, *"think the relationship with local actors is adequate"*, while *"many national NGOs characterize it as extractive or transactional"* (ibid: 10). It also says that *"one decade into independence, the humanitarian community's*

¹⁵¹ Interview, 12 November 2021

¹⁵² Interview, 20 November 2021 (a)

“capacity building” efforts for national NGOs have had inadequate results, and international humanitarian actors have not empowered national NGOs in any consistent way” (ibid: 10). This is a striking assessment on numerous levels, not least given the long history of ‘capacity building’ interventions in South Sudan (stretching back far earlier than independence); it also points to the continued prevalence of the narrative amongst international organisations that South Sudanese NGOs ‘lack capacity’. The review also states that *“while donors, international NGOs, and UN agencies frequently spoke about capacity building for national NGOs, they are unclear about what type of capacity is needed”* (ibid: 10).

For South Sudanese individuals who have been involved in the aid industry and NGO arena for years or decades, the circularity of these discussions is obvious. As one interviewee, a former teacher who had worked with South Sudanese NGOs in a range of capacities since the 1990s, including on several civil society strengthening initiatives, and who was currently working as an independent consultant, reflected, a lot *“depends on those who are claiming to be building capacity”*. He continued, *“if I’m a teacher, and I have been teaching a class which is not passing and which is not graduating, I should be thinking about my teaching methods or the tools that I have been using, much more than thinking about the students that I have in the class.”*¹⁵³ Another interviewee, an expatriate staff member in an international organisation, commented, of ideas around South Sudanese NGOs lacking capacity: *“it’s been a song, it’s been like a national anthem, everyone’s singing the same song, over and over again.”* The problem in his view was that *“we don’t put the money in, the required funding, to help achieve that”*.¹⁵⁴

7.3. Localisation without transformation: the dominance of the subcontract

Data on humanitarian funding flows is inconsistent and incomplete (Girling-Morris et al., 2022), making it very hard to accurately assess the state of funding for South Sudanese NGOs.

Nonetheless, the data that is available suggests that *direct* funding to South Sudanese NGOs has changed very little in recent years, despite the growing numbers of South Sudanese NGOs, the reliance on these organisations to deliver aid particularly in ‘hard-to-reach’ or conflict-affected areas, and the pervasive rhetoric around ‘localisation’. In 2016, just under 1% of all humanitarian funding to South Sudan, as tracked through UN OCHA’s Financial Tracking Service (FTS), went directly to local and national NGOs, including pooled funding. This rose, briefly, to around 2.4% in 2018 and 3% in 2019, before falling again to 1.4% in 2021.¹⁵⁵ The South Sudan Humanitarian

¹⁵³ Interview, 18 November 2021 (b)

¹⁵⁴ Interview, 23 November 2021 (c)

¹⁵⁵ Based on OCHA FTS data, downloaded March 2023. Calculations relied on FTS categorisations of ‘recipient type’, and included funds categorised as having been channelled either to ‘local NGOs’ or ‘national NGOs’. Data is available at <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/211/summary/2021>; definitions are available at <https://fts.unocha.org/glossary> (last accessed 6.7.2024).

Fund (SSHF), the main pooled fund, is an important source of funding for South Sudanese NGOs. However, it accounts for a small share of overall humanitarian funding and is only accessible to the largest organisations. The share of SSHF funding going directly to national NGOs rose steeply, from 12% in 2016 to 39% in 2018 (UN OCHA, 2019b), before falling again to 26% in 2020 and 16% in 2021 (UN OCHA, 2021, 2022a). A similar pattern – of a brief rise in funding to local actors following the WHS, followed by a fall – is seen in humanitarian funding to the food sector in South Sudan. The food sector accounts for a significant proportion of all international humanitarian assistance to South Sudan: over 50% in 2021 (CAFOD & Development Initiatives, 2023). In 2017, around 3.4% of food sector funding in South Sudan was disbursed (directly and indirectly) to local and national actors; since 2018, this figure has been around 1-2% (ibid). Between 2017 and 2022, around 0.4% of all food sector spending in South Sudan went *directly* to local and national NGOs (ibid). This mirrors global trends, as discussed in the introduction.

With direct funding having changed very little, the vast majority of funding for South Sudanese NGOs is channelled through intermediaries (UN agencies and INGOs) in the form of subcontracting arrangements. These subcontracts are often short-term, with the majority of agreements lasting between three and 12 months (Ali et al., 2018), and are typically highly prescriptive.¹⁵⁶ International organisations vary in their approaches to working with South Sudanese NGOs, and some organisations, contracting arrangements and partnership practices were viewed far more positively by interlocutors within South Sudanese NGOs than others. Nonetheless, the overall picture emerging from interviews and observations was of significant frustration with a predominance of short-term, prescriptive subcontracting arrangements, rarely lasting for longer than a year. There were often large gaps between contracts, even in the case of repeat arrangements with the same international organisations, resulting in interviewees often having to let go of and then rehire staff. Pre-financing requirements, in which organisations are required to cover the cost of project implementation upfront and then be reimbursed, pose significant challenges to all but the largest national NGOs, as discussed further below. Meanwhile numerous organisations had received project-based funding that did not include support for overhead costs, or had received in-kind support from international organisations, in the form of goods to distribute, with no support for staff costs or overheads. The overall picture

¹⁵⁶ This was clear in my own research, and is supported by existing studies (Kiewied et al., 2020; Tanner & Moro, 2016).

strongly resonated with what Barter and Sumlut (2022) describe as a ‘low-quality localisation’, characterised by greater subcontracting.

The top-down subcontracting approach to engaging with South Sudanese NGOs was a common theme across interviews and conversations with interlocutors from a wide range of organisations, with interviewees often arguing that they had relatively limited influence over the design of projects and programmes they were contracted to deliver. This was seen, for example, in a conversation with the director of one of South Sudan’s largest national NGOs. This is one of several NGOs that expanded very rapidly after the outbreak of conflict in 2013. He described the changes in organisational structure and focus that have been required in order to access resources from a system that “*requires that you be more worried about the donors than the beneficiaries*”. Although they have a turnover of several million dollars, almost all of it comes from subcontracts from international organisations and he doesn’t feel it has the impact it could be having. They try to find ‘loopholes’, and to use unrestricted pockets of funding to do things that they think are genuinely useful. Nonetheless, his own view of the humanitarian system, in which he has been involved for 15 years, was highly critical:

*We’ve been implementing the same programmes in this country, all over, for almost every other year... there’s never been any difference, there’s never been any innovation, there’s never been a room for people to decide. And you will be wondering, why are the needs increasing every year? ...We know we are not doing something right. But we don’t make decisions to change that fate.*¹⁵⁷

He was disillusioned with the humanitarian industry and planning his exit; though he was also actively involved in lobbying for change in the humanitarian system, in South Sudan and beyond, something that likely also shaped his account.

Similar views were expressed by interlocutors from a wide range of organisations. Another interviewee, the director of a small legal aid and advocacy NGO based in the capital, said, for example, that “*it’s very difficult here in South Sudan*”, because “*what [donors] do is already what they have planned for themselves, they will just call you then say, yes, call for proposal, you write your proposal, then you are selected, then they perhaps they give you those activities, then you go implement.*”¹⁵⁸ Donors, in this interlocutor’s account and indeed in many of the examples in this section, referred to

¹⁵⁷ Interview, 19 November 2021 (a)

¹⁵⁸ Interview, 18 November 2021 (a)

international NGOs and UN agencies as well as bilateral donors. Another interviewee, a staff member of a relatively small, long-standing, sub-national NGO engaged in advocacy and civic engagement work, said, of their work, *“it is like 70% donor directed. Because they do have their own plans, they do have their own dreams, and because the money is theirs, then you’re forced to do what they want.”* In his own experience, he says, they end up *“directly just going to where they want us to go, not to where we want to go together. The way I’ve seen, it is very rare to go to where you want to go... you are directed by the donor.”*¹⁵⁹ A third, the director of a small, humanitarian-oriented NGO, said that, if you seek funds from international organisations, *“you have to do it the way they want, you have to be adhering to their bible.”* He continued, *“the organizations who sub-granted you... they will make themselves donors, and then they just like demanding, directing, not like, ‘can we do it this way?’”*¹⁶⁰ An expatriate staff member with an international NGO, who had worked in South Sudan for many years, concurred, stating,

*[South Sudanese NGOs] are treated as subcontractors in the truest sense of subcontractors, not sub-grantees. Keeping in mind, the difference between a grant and a contract is the grant is it's your project, and a contractor, I've employed you. And I think that is the part that you bear over and over again, they're not having a say in design, they're not having a say in staffing, they're not having a say in location, it's just kind of, 'there you go'.*¹⁶¹

Scope for negotiation varied, between organisations and projects. A woman running a long-standing women’s rights and peacebuilding organisation argued that *“most of the donor funding, they come with their conditions, preconditions, that somehow maybe they were pre-empted somewhere... that ‘these are the problems that are affecting South Sudan’, and this is the funding that we are supposed to be giving, and they will not twitch.”* She continues, *“if you talk... to international organisations who have a link directly with their donors, they will tell you, ‘you have to implement like this’... this is how it is, so you have to change to do it like this. So that is how also organisations’ missions get swayed, they get drifted.”*¹⁶² Another interviewee, the director of a mid-sized, sub-national NGO, explained that most of their projects are secured by responding to calls for proposals, in which aims and locations are typically already decided. As a result, he said:

When there's a call for proposal, you don't have room to suggest where it should be. So, because it is a competitive process, you just apply. Then maybe during negotiations, if you are selected, and negotiations

¹⁵⁹ Interview, 6 December 2021

¹⁶⁰ Interview, 25 October 2021 (a)

¹⁶¹ Interview, 28 November 2021

¹⁶² Interview, 1 November 2021 (a)

start, then you have a room to say okay look, the way we have seen this, it can also work here better. And then at some moment, maybe they will accept it, some moment, they don't [laughs] and then you have to go with that. Yeah, so but we, sometimes we also have our own independent observations, like our own ideas, what can work best in different places. Then we develop then sometimes like unsolicited projects and share, but rarely, rarely do you get maybe funding for that, as per now. Most of the current funding is those already decided, and are just looking for partners.

This is frustrating, he says, because *“there are certain things we know can help our people best, and then you need some support to do it. But nobody may be willing to do that... if nobody's supporting it, you also leave it.”* He continues, *“if there were these kinds of programmes, where there are maybe potentials for unsolicited projects, yeah, it could stimulate a lot of creativity and innovation in people, and they can now design what really is suitable for the community... But the current way it is working, is there is a funding already decided for this, partners apply for it, and then those who are selected get to implement.”*¹⁶³

Beyond more explicit directives to work in a certain way, in a competitive project marketplace, South Sudanese organisations also often orient themselves and their offerings around what they think international organisations want to see. For example, one interviewee, an experienced South Sudanese researcher and consultant, had conducted evaluations and reviews of the work of South Sudanese NGOs. In some cases, he said, *“you could easily see that they are not delivering to the expectation of the community”*; even though the organisation may *“also come from the same area, but now they have been taken up by designing frameworks and so on, that are not speaking to what the community wants.”* The problem, he felt, was *“the design - we have our own mental template, and we think this is the right thing for our people.”* Plus, he says, *“national NGOs package themselves to speak to the humanitarian systems here. Because the Humanitarian Country Team meets, and they say okay, we're allocating funds for this. And if you contradict their design, you will be thrown out.”* Part of the issue, in his view, is the concentration of international organisations within the capital: *“the risk for many international partners is that they only want to end at Juba level, but they don't want to monitor the dynamics and do joint programming with communities and maybe having agreements with communities on what they think could be done. So that leaves a lot of, of gaps in the delivery of, of aid, aid and services to people”*. Plus, he says, of national organisations, *“sometimes we don't want to tell the truth to the donor, to really challenge them and say, look, this cannot work here”*.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶³ Interview, 7 November 2021 (b)

¹⁶⁴ Interview, 18 November 2021 (b)

There are nuances to this picture. Many interviewees were highly critical of the ways in which international donor funding shaped the structures, focus and trajectories of their organisations, and dictated how and where they worked. Some found ways to resist donor pressures and, in doing so, to retain a degree of independence over their work. Interviewees described instances of strategic refusal, renegotiation or reappropriation of funds, as well as ways of resourcing and maintaining activities viewed as core to their work but difficult to fund, or requests for activities that came directly from communities they worked with. This included the use of overheads, working voluntarily, or using funds raised through income generation projects. Several explained how they would accept donor-funded projects but ensure, in various ways, that they met their objectives as an organisation, too. For example, one interviewee, the director of a sub-national, membership-based organisation that intermittently implemented funded projects for international organisations, explained that the organisation's general assembly, comprised of members from the local area, played an important role in *"seeing to it that the objectives of the organization are being met, when the activities are done. Because we do not just implement the donor's activity and that's it. We have to put the flavour of [this organisation] there, by preaching the message of peace, peaceful coexistence."* The general assembly would assess whether he, as a director, was doing this effectively: *"so you find them, they are following us on the radio. 'Yeah, you did well'. Or, sometimes they just pay us a visit here. And they go, sometimes when we are having the meeting, they say, 'you're supposed to do that'. And they always see to it that we're doing it."*¹⁶⁵

Some had resisted pressures to expand into new geographic areas or sectors, turning down offers from current or prospective donors that would have led to them working in thematic areas where they had no expertise, or in parts of the country where they had no experience. In the words of one director, *"we are operating only in [region], with communities that know our programme, they know what we do, and we build from there, because at the end, you also need an impact in the longer term."* This meant resisting the temptation to apply for short-term, humanitarian funding that is *"bringing that attitude of going everywhere, and you don't provide good results"*.¹⁶⁶ Another interlocutor, the director of a sub-national NGO, quoted earlier in this section, described turning down funding they were offered for a project that would have taken them out of their area of expertise, because *"we want this kind of spirit of specialisation"*.¹⁶⁷ This is itself a form of resistance in a humanitarian system that privileges scale, incentivising organisations to develop a presence in multiple locations, and to work across many sectors, in order to be eligible for more opportunities for funding. Some were

¹⁶⁵ Interview, 3 December 2021 (a)

¹⁶⁶ Interview, 10 November 2021 (b)

¹⁶⁷ Interview, 7 November 2021 (b)

very selective about what funding they applied for or accepted. One NGO director emphasised that she avoided contracts where they would be expected to do the ‘donkey work’¹⁶⁸ on projects designed by someone else, while another interviewee argued, for example, that if they think it is ‘not an honest offer’, they would say no: *“for example, some donors have money left, and it’s coming to the end of the year, and they’re like, you know, we want you to implement this, because we are just left with this money and we need to account.”*¹⁶⁹ If they felt that they could not implement the funding well, they would turn it down. Nonetheless, this tended to be the exception rather than the rule – mostly, interviewees emphasised that, with funds scarce, competition fierce and keeping organisations afloat a constant struggle, they had little choice than to accept any funding that was offered.

In addition, despite strong pressures towards ‘upward accountability’, some organisations had sought to create spaces and structures for discussion with and accountability to local communities in areas where they worked, alongside or in addition to more formal accountability and feedback requirements that took place as part of their programmes. This was the case, for example, for several organisations that had governing assemblies comprised of individuals from across the region in which they worked, who provided feedback on the organisation’s work, suggested priorities for future work, and elected board members for the organisation from amongst their membership. One, long-standing organisation, involved in peace-oriented work, described holding ‘town hall style meetings’ as a *“bottom-up approach of governance, where we meet the community under the trees, like a small parliament”*.¹⁷⁰ Another, sub-nationally based NGO used money raised from small income generating projects to hold community forums in their compound; these forums ensure they are well-connected to and aware of key issues in the community, which then shapes their proposals.¹⁷¹

It is also important to point out that decision making and prioritisation within international organisations are shaped and constrained by numerous, complex processes, practices, policies and principles. Prioritisation and planning of the humanitarian response is shaped, in the first instance, by the Humanitarian Needs Overview (HNO) and Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), which set the boundaries and scope of the response (Mena & Hilhorst, 2022).¹⁷² These

¹⁶⁸ Fieldnotes, December 2021

¹⁶⁹ Interview, 16 November 2021 (c)

¹⁷⁰ Interview, 10 December 2021

¹⁷¹ Interview, 25 November 2021 (c)

¹⁷² These processes are guided in part by the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), an influential, complex and sometimes fraught process assessing food insecurity across the country (see Buchanan-Smith et al., 2021).

processes are led by UN OCHA. A concerted effort has been made in recent years to involve more South Sudanese actors in these planning and prioritisation processes, which have traditionally been dominated by expatriate staff. One interviewee involved with these processes reflected, for example, that *“previously in every almost given fora, you will find that it is only expatriates who gather around to discuss needs analysis, needs mapping, to discuss response planning, you know, to discuss response scale up”*, but that things had been changing in the last two or three years – albeit slowly. He continued, *“the pace of change is not very encouraging, it's slow. But I'm happy to say that it is steady, and more and more local actors are joining these fora, and their voices are being tapped into, and they are getting louder and better at shaping the humanitarian analysis and response.”*¹⁷³

Nonetheless, the overall picture for South Sudanese NGOs is of a funding landscape characterised by short-term, prescriptive subcontracts, in which competition is high and scope for negotiation with donors and intermediaries is limited. Much of the above resonates with a significant body of existing literature, discussed earlier, on the pressures on NGOs to prioritise ‘upward’ accountability to donors over accountability to staff, members and constituencies, as well as the ways in which individuals and organisations variously accede to, navigate and resist these pressures (Banks et al., 2015; Ebrahim, 2003; Massoud, 2015; Townsend et al., 2004; Peck, 2019). That South Sudanese NGOs are often influenced by international organisations, and face significant pressure – implicitly and explicitly – to align themselves to their priorities, largely fits the predictions of resource dependency theory.¹⁷⁴ For example Hudock (1995), drawing on resource dependency theory and focusing on NGOs in Sierra Leone and Gambia, argued that southern-based NGOs were vulnerable to external control, given the extent to which they relied on northern-based NGOs for organisational survival and the asymmetry of the relationship between them. At the same time, as Lewis (2014) points out, resource dependency theory has been criticised for overlooking agency, and different individuals and organisations also respond to these pressures in different ways, as is also evident in the accounts above.

The picture above also reflects trends towards managerialism and the ‘projectisation’ of aid. These trends are complex and contested, but nonetheless pervasive, and are themselves the subject of a significant body of research (Crewe & Mowles, 2021; Eagleton-Pierce, 2020; Eagleton-Pierce & Knafo, 2020; Freeman & Schuller, 2020; Gulrajani, 2011; Krause, 2014;

¹⁷³ Interview, 23 November 2021 (c)

¹⁷⁴ Resource dependency theory posits that organisations are *“inescapably bound up with the conditions of their environment”*, on which they depend on for resources of all kinds, and that they are therefore both shaped by and seek to shape their environment; and that an organisation’s vulnerability to external influence is partly determined by the relative magnitude of a resource, and its criticality to an organisation (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003: 1).

Seabrooke & Sending, 2020). Managerialism, amongst other things, *“has promoted a distinctive cultural frame which values abstract templates, as well as a kind of short-termism”* (Eagleton-Pierce & Knafo, 2020: 772), and the pursuit of the ‘good project’ can develop a logic of its own, in ways that can shape decision-making and the allocation of resources (Krause, 2014). Managerial processes – from audits to monitoring and evaluation – of course remain intensely political, social and power-ridden processes, while perhaps creating an aura of predictability, consistency and control (Crewe & Mowles, 2021; Eagleton-Pierce, 2020).

Krause (2014) and Freeman and Schuller (2020) have each explored how the project form has permeated and profoundly shaped the aid industry. Each argues that, in a competitive ‘marketplace’ of projects, donors are the primary ‘consumers’ of projects, and it is to donors that projects are predominantly marketed, a point also articulated in several of the quotes above. Freeman and Schuller (2020: 3) argue that the rise of NGOs and of the project form are symbiotic and self-reinforcing: NGOs are a *“bureaucratic form that is acceptable to, and auditable by, donors that disburse projects”*, while projects are *“the lifeblood of subcontracting organizations that... survive by moving from project to project”* (ibid: 3), as is indeed the case for many South Sudanese NGOs. The pervasiveness of the project form in South Sudan, and its far-reaching effects on how organisations work and on how services are delivered, were evident throughout my research; this could itself be the topic of another thesis, as well as the ways in which varied individuals and organisations in and around the ‘aid chain’ navigate this. My focus here, however, is more specifically on the implications of the pervasiveness of the subcontract for experiences of work in South Sudanese NGOs.

7.4. “A lot of energy for less payment”: Subcontracted employment in the humanitarian industry

The pervasiveness of the subcontracted project, as the architecture through which South Sudanese NGOs are integrated into the international humanitarian industry, intimately shapes the nature of work within these organisations. In many ways, this represents a form of subcontracted employment (Wills, 2009), in which those doing the frontline labour of aid are disconnected from their ‘real employers’: those determining, to a significant extent, the work that they do, their salaries and benefits, and the length of their contracts. In turn, the directors and senior staff of South Sudanese NGOs struggle to provide the salaries, benefits or consistency of employment that they feel, firstly, their staff need, and secondly, that would help reduce staff turnover, leading to some of the frustrations discussed in the previous chapter.

My argument is not that South Sudanese NGO leaders and staff have no agency in this process. Nor is it that all international organisations are identical in the way in which they work with South Sudanese NGOs. Nonetheless, there is an important structural, systemic point to be made about the way in which the work experiences and labour conditions of those working for subcontracted domestic organisations are shaped by the position of these organisations at, or near, the bottom of long subcontracting chains. Jane Wills argues that subcontracted employment is becoming the paradigmatic form of employment, with far-reaching implications for wages and conditions, for power relations and for experiences of work. Subcontracting, Wills argues, is a *“particularly effective way for employers to cut costs, shed responsibility, increase flexibility and disempower the workforce”* (Wills, 2009: 444). Amongst the implications of subcontracting are that contractors (as employers), facing pressure from short-term contracts and increased competition, *“are forced to cut back on employees’ pay and standards of work”* (ibid: 444). Meanwhile, in relationships of subcontracted employment, workers are *“spatially and/or emotionally distanced from the people in the board rooms and offices who determine their conditions of work”* (ibid: 444). The ‘real employer’, for Wills, is the organisation that sets the terms of the contract, even *“down to determining materials, head count, and wage levels in many cases”* (ibid: 444).

Wills’ argument is based on research in a very different context, focusing on living wage campaigns in two hospitals in the UK. Nonetheless, the subcontract is a pervasive global technology, including across the aid industry, and her depiction of ‘subcontracted employment’ resonances with the situation for South Sudanese NGOs engaged in the international humanitarian industry. As we have seen, much funding for South Sudanese NGOs, as channelled through the aid industry, takes the form of subcontracts. There is a huge amount of pressure on South Sudanese NGOs, in the context of a highly competitive ‘project marketplace’, to keep costs low. The significant pressure on humanitarian funding, the narrative of South Sudanese NGOs as low-cost, and the sheer number of South Sudanese NGOs competing for a relatively small pot of funding, all place downward pressure on wages. Interlocutors also recounted, with some frequency, that their staff costs (as well as many other aspects of project budgets) were dictated by international organisations, a situation that resonates with Wills’ depiction of subcontracted employment.

One interviewee, for example, was a man who worked in a senior position in the sub-national office of a national NGO. He had worked, over the last two decades, for a wide range of

organisations, including international and South Sudanese NGOs and the local government, and had been in his current position for several years. His own experience, as someone that had worked with UN agencies, international NGOs and national NGOs, was that *“the work nature can be the same, but the payment is different. So, the capacity of the institution itself will be always different.”* He elaborated, with a significant degree of frustration, that,

UN agencies and international organisations guarantee [within their own organisations] things that aid or assist the work, like, for example, vehicles, good offices, working environment, and also good payment, and those will also assist now you to make sure the mandate has to be exhausted the way it is needed. But you will find that most of the time, it is when there is no funding, or it is very little amount, then they will look for a national organisation to implement, because they are cheap, in a way that they [international organisations] can actually condition how much amount for a position, that is what is available.

Given the competition for funds in South Sudan, he continues, *“most of the national organisations, they take whatever is given simply because they don’t have anything outside. And if you have this, this is what is available, then we take. And then when we take it, you start now squeezing, giving very little money for the staff.”* As a result, there was a gulf in salary and working conditions between this organisation and their primary donor, a large international organisation. As an implementing partner, they are doing work *“in the name of the [international] organisation”*, and, he says, *“we exhaust our efforts to make sure we are doing something that really gives a good name of that partner that we are representing. But we are doing it out of what, out of a lot of energy with less payment.”* All this leads to significant staff turnover within the organisation he works for, which increased the burden on him, because he was continually re-recruiting and re-training people. If you ask international intermediaries for higher salaries for your staff, he said,

They will tell you that we don't have funding, this is what we have... we are designing [our own budgets] of course, but they will go and say that no, no, this is too much, reduce this one. So, at the end, it sounds like we are the ones making it [the budget] and share it like that, it is not them. But in reality, they are the ones, because if you are giving me, and I give you for review and you tell me, 'try to work on this', 'reduce this', then what am I doing? It is not me, it is you.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ Interview, 2 December 2021

He noted a similar challenge with other elements of their budgets, arguing, for example, that the costs allowed for vehicle hire were not enough to rent a vehicle at the going rate in the town (a rate inflated by the presence of international organisations, willing to pay higher fees). As a result, he says, *“you will find yourself that you are scratching your mind on how to manage... you are managing always in a very squeezed corner.”* For him, all this makes the prevalent narrative that South Sudanese NGOs lack capacity particularly frustrating, arguing, *“we are critiqued that the national organisation, they have no capacity, they have no good staffing. But this is not that we don't have good staff or don't have capacity, you are not giving us the means to make us able to also do the work the way you have your own means.”* This account resonates with Wills’ depiction of subcontracted employment; they are doing work ‘in the name of’ an international organisation, for a lower salary than they pay their own staff.

As this interlocutor points out, though subcontracted organisations, in theory, have autonomy over their budgets, including what they pay their staff, in practice, they are often influenced, implicitly or explicitly, by international intermediaries (who, in turn, may also be under pressure to keep costs low from their donors). Another interviewee, the director of a mid-sized, advocacy-oriented NGO, that has been running for around 20 years, argued that international organisations *“talk of capacity, which is like singing for them. [Yet] they are the ones that take our skilful staff.”* Again, in practice, what they paid their staff was significantly influenced by what international organisations were willing to pay: *“they [international organisations] are the ones to calculate [salaries], it is their agenda. Because they say, ‘okay, now we don’t have money, your staff should be having salaries at this level because of that money’. But when you ask them, ‘how much is for your officer?’, it’s very high.”* As a result, they regularly lose staff to international organisations, as discussed in previous chapters; in this way, *“the cycle continues, and tomorrow, they come and say, you don't have capacity”*.¹⁷⁶

This picture is supported by other recent studies in South Sudan. Ali et al. (2018: 11), for example, write that *“the majority of NNGOs stated that funding decisions are largely dictated to them”* by international organisations, and that they felt *“pressured to reduce costs”*, but that there were examples of organisations working together to ‘decide needs’, usually when a longer-term relationship existed. Ali et al. also note that South Sudanese NGOs’ ‘real costs’ were often not fully covered, due, in part, to the significant expense of operating in South Sudan, as well as an unwillingness on the part of funders to cover administrative costs. Hamsik (2019: 18), meanwhile, points to a discrepancy in perceptions of collaboration around budgeting, noting that

¹⁷⁶ Interview, 25 October 2021 (b)

“where INGO and UN donors said discussions with partners on budget concerns are encouraged, local officials said they had little leverage or space to address poorly costed programs.”

Again, there are many nuances here. Different international organisations have very different approaches to funding South Sudanese NGOs; some are more favourable than others, with better provision for staff salaries and overheads, amongst other things. There are numerous examples of both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practice, as detailed across several studies (see Ali et al., 2018; CARE et al., 2019b; Moro et al., 2020; Tanner & Moro, 2016). In addition, scope for negotiation varied, from project to project and organisation to organisation, and some international organisations were seen as more amenable to negotiation than others. As one interviewee said, *“some donors understand, when you negotiate, when you argue, but there are those that say... if you don't want this grant, we will give it to the next. So, if we are forced, because we want funding, you will accept.”*¹⁷⁷ Scope for negotiation also depended on the nature of the relationship between the international and South Sudanese organisation, and on the knowledge of South Sudanese NGO leaders and staff about how the international system works, and how it can best be manoeuvred. In several cases, interlocutors suggested that negotiation over the terms of contracts was more possible when back donors (those ultimately funding the project) were accessible; open channels of communication clearly made a big difference.

However, there is also a broader structural point to be made: that through their position at or near the bottom of a long subcontracting chain, South Sudanese NGOs’ scope for negotiation is limited; and that a significant, increasing portion of the aid workforce is being employed through subcontracting arrangements in which terms of employment are dictated to a significant extent by international organisations, not by their direct employers. This is exacerbated by the intense competition for funding in South Sudan’s humanitarian arena, and by the prevalence of the ‘cost-efficiency’ framing as a driver of localisation, as discussed above.

7.5. Short-term subcontracts and ‘just-in-time’ staffing

The prevalence of the short-term subcontract as the structure for disbursing aid to South Sudanese NGOs leads, in turn, to a prevalence of short-term employment, creating significant uncertainty for employees and increasing staff turnover within these organisations. Navigating short-term subcontracts also demanded significant unremunerated relational and affective labour from the staff of South Sudanese NGOs, as they sought to smooth the gaps between

¹⁷⁷ Interview, 10 November 2021 (b)

intermittent projects: maintaining relationships, managing expectations and, sometimes, continuing to provide services on a voluntary basis. This resonates with a growing body of work on the social and relational labour demanded of ‘local’, frontline aid workers (of international and national organisations alike), which is integral to making aid operations ‘work’, but which is often unacknowledged and unremunerated (James, 2020; Peters, 2020; Sundberg, 2020).

Short-term, temporary employment contracts are common across the aid industry, including in UN agencies and international NGOs, and for staff in a wide range of positions (Hindman & Fechter, 2011; Mülli, 2021; Pascucci, 2019), in line with neoliberal trends towards the flexibilisation and casualisation of labour, and reflecting trends towards projectisation discussed above. Roth (2015b) notes that few of her interlocutors had permanent contracts; most had short-term contracts and moved from organisation to organisation. Short-term contracts place constant pressure on workers to perform in order to stay employed (Hindman & Fechter, 2011; Roth, 2015b), contributing to the trends towards self-optimisation discussed in earlier chapters.

For employers, short-term contract work can represent a form of ‘just-in-time staffing’: workers are hired as and when needed, and skills are *“ostensibly available to them for an overall cheaper amount, as employers typically do not bear responsibility of salaries and benefits for extended periods”* (Rao, 2017: 431). For employees, short-term contract work may sometimes be welcomed as giving autonomy and flexibility (ibid.); an interviewee in Roth’s study, for example, notes that going from one contract to another can be ‘liberating’, (Roth, 2015b), while Waite (2009: 418), amongst others, highlights the danger of *“stripping labourers of their agency... and constructing them as persistent victims of precarious environments”*. For many, however, short-term contract work is characterised by a high degree of uncertainty, the repercussions of which may be ‘acutely experienced’ in workers’ personal lives (Rao, 2017). This is seen, for example, in both Rao (2017) and Mülli’s (2021) studies of short-term contract workers within the UN system in Geneva and Vienna, as discussed in the introduction. Rao, for example, depicts a practice of ‘just-in-time’ staffing within the UN, in which short-term contracts may be re-issued or reneged on in a somewhat ‘chaotic’, informal manner, demanding flexibility from its employees. In this way, she argues, the UN *“has shifted the unpredictability of its own budget”* (Rao, 2017: 449) onto its employees, for whom, at least amongst the early-career professionals studied by Rao, this was experienced not as a welcome flexibility, but rather as uncertain, disconcerting and challenging. At the same time, these interlocutors placed limits on the amount of uncertainty they were willing to accept, and had access to other financial resources which enabled them to take risks in their employment.

The context for workers in South Sudanese NGOs is very different. As we have seen, jobs in the aid industry are one of few sources of salaried employment, and interlocutors did not have the same possibilities to walk away and secure employment in other fields as those in Rao and Mülli's studies; nor, for the most part, did they have financial resources to fall back on. Yet, there are also similarities, including in the prevalence of short-term contracts and the demands placed on workers for flexibility; in part, because the contracting practices of UN agencies and international NGOs are reproduced in the national NGOs that they subcontract, influencing the structure of work within these organisations. At the same time, experiences of uncertainty are perhaps intensified within subcontracted South Sudanese NGOs: South Sudanese NGOs are, generally, far smaller, and with fewer sources of income than international organisations, and with budgets that fluctuate dramatically from year-to-year, and even month-to-month. The unpredictability of funding is shifted down the aid chain: from international to national organisations, and then onto their staff.

This is illustrated by the account of one interviewee, a senior staff member in a relatively small, sub-nationally based NGO that has been running for around 15 years. He had an undergraduate degree in a relevant field and a significant amount of work experience. He had worked for several years for an international NGO in the same area, but his job ended with the end of a project. He spent another two years looking for a new job, eventually securing his current position. He generally enjoys his job, feeling that he has learned a lot, and that, in his new role, he is able to work more closely both with local communities in the area and with the local government than he was in his previous role, reflections that resonate with those described in chapter six. There are two big differences in his experience of work between the two organisations. The first is in the regularity of his salary, which, when he worked for an international organisation, came every month. In local organisations, he says,

Donors are looking at them like they are not strong enough, so what they will just get is like three- or six-month project, or maximum one year, you see? So, this one, you will just be shaking, okay now, after these six months, what will happen? ... you will just know that this one is ending very soon. Then that one, when it ends, the entire organisation is looking for other funds. It means people are not stable at all. This is a really big difference.

The other difference, in his experience, was more positive: *“working with the community in both, it is really interesting, because with the local organisation, they trust us, we interact easily”*. Nonetheless, he says, you often end up working without pay while waiting for further funds to arrive, or when expected funds are delayed. In such cases, he says, *“because of these short, short contracts, when it ends, you have to wait... you work as a volunteer, because we are helping our people, this is a local organisation, so we have to wait, we have to bear the situation until we gain another funds. It is really challenging by the way, it is not easy.”* At the time we met, he had not been paid for three months. He had been managing two projects, each funded by a different international organisation. Both were supposed to have a second phase, and they had been waiting in each case for several months for information about the next stage of these projects. He does not know why they have been delayed, saying, *“it depends upon their process, how they are doing their things”*. This, in part, is why he does not want to look for other work; he is confident that these projects *“are coming, and I am the one managing. So, if I shifted [to another organisation], then I would put [name of this organisation] in problem”*.¹⁷⁸

Another interviewee, a young man employed by a national NGO in his hometown, said, similarly, *“the stopping of funding also scares a lot of organisations. Like when you are told your project will start this month and end this month, when you are about to come to an end, you are in fear”*. In his case, his manager in Juba is the one to develop a new proposal each time, to submit to the international organisation funding the project on which he is employed. There is often a delay between one project ending and the next being confirmed, and again between the confirmation of a new project and the disbursement of funds. When one project is concluded, he says, *“the donor can tell you go ahead, because they receive a new proposal. So go ahead up to this month again. The issue of salary is sometimes a bit complicated, like working with the national NGO, it is a bit harder and harder. You may see that you may work for two to three months with no payment, or up to five months also... but you keep working because they are your community, they are your beneficiaries, where will you go? And you accepted to work for that organisation.”*¹⁷⁹ Different national NGOs adopted different approaches to managing the challenge of short-term, unpredictable funding, as discussed further below. More broadly, however, these examples resonate with observations made elsewhere, that local staff often mediate and mitigate the messiness and unpredictability of aid work through their bodies and physical presence (Pascucci, 2019).

¹⁷⁸ Interview, 6 December 2021

¹⁷⁹ Interview, 24 July 2019

The challenges associated with short-term funding related not just to the prevalence of short-term employment, but also to the difficulties this could pose for an organisation's work. One interviewee, for example, was a young woman working for a women's rights NGO. She was generally very enthusiastic about her work. However, the hardest thing about her job, she said, was the short-term nature of the funding, making it difficult to 'sustain implementation'. It was absurd, she said, to begin some 'good work' and then to have to 'stop something halfway'. Most of the donor-funded projects she had worked on were short: either three, six or nine months. This was too short, but *"to keep providing support, you can take the project."* Nonetheless, she says, *"it's painful when you have to leave, and you can't sustain it on your own"*.¹⁸⁰ In some locations, with support from the board, they had managed to keep offices open and to continue providing services in a small way, while seeking to secure further funding, though this was not always possible. Another interviewee, the director of a small, Juba-based NGO, reflected that the best support he received was from one international organisation, which was for at least nine months. However, he says, *"the rest is three months, seven months, six months."* The problem with this short-term funding, he says, is that *"sometimes it brings issues with the beneficiaries. So, some will say, now you are just blocking other donors to come, other NGOs to come, then you just come for three to four months then you go."*¹⁸¹ Again, different organisations adopted different strategies to navigate these challenges. In addition, there are reasons why and circumstances in which short-term interventions are essential, particularly in the context of an ongoing humanitarian crisis. The prevalence of short-term funding, however, created significant difficulties for South Sudanese NGO directors and staff. A significant amount of relational labour is demanded from the staff of South Sudanese NGOs to 'smooth' the gaps between intermittent, short-term projects, including to manage expectations and maintain relationships.

International organisations adopt different contracting vehicles and payment models for South Sudanese NGOs. These include tranche-based funding arrangements, based on milestones, and pre-financing or payment-by-results, in which costs are incurred by the South Sudanese NGO and reimbursed based on satisfactory completion of activities (Hamsik, 2019). The latter posed particular challenges for all but the very largest South Sudanese NGOs. South Sudanese organisations often have little in the way of cash reserves that they can use to pre-finance such programmes. There are also numerous reasons why payments might be delayed, including those related to the international organisation's internal processes and the verification of results

¹⁸⁰ Interview, 15 November 2021 (c)

¹⁸¹ Interview, 26 November 2021

(Hamsik, 2019). Payment-by-results and payment delays can create significant risks and challenges for South Sudanese NGOs and their staff, including incurring debts, delaying staff payments, and making complicated cash flow arrangements (such as borrowing money from other projects), which might later be misconstrued as financial mismanagement (ibid). One interviewee, for example, in a sub-national NGO, explained, *“sometimes the salary delays for more than a month, because there are programmes that we are doing on pre-financing. If we are running this programme on pre-financing, it means we need first to account for that money so the cash comes. But although you do the accountability, it takes time, it is very complicated, you can wait for one month, and this staff needs to be paid, so you take money from other things.”* The impact, he said, *“is some staff get demotivated... but what we always do is to tell them the truth, we have to be very open, we say please, we have these challenges, but when the money comes we shall pay all the arrears, but we need the work to be done... so with this encouragement some of them are committed and they really work.”*¹⁸²

Different South Sudanese NGOs adopted different approaches to recruiting and retaining staff, and to the use of volunteers. The most obvious difference was between those that were predominantly structured as professional NGOs with paid members of staff, and those that were predominantly volunteer-run organisations with occasional funded projects, though the line between the two is not at all clear-cut. The former generally had a mixture of core staff who they sought to retain over longer periods and project staff who were hired onto specific subcontracts; though, whose employment might be renewed if further projects were secured. As the director of a relatively large, sub-nationally based NGO, explained,

*Our core staff, we usually get them some six months contract, like, HR, finance, you know, those ones which have to work, and some key project managers, and then you renew it after every six months. Then the other staff, it depends on the length of the project... maybe the project you have been given is three months. So, you also give the contract according to the project. Because they will be engaged for, during the project duration, then when the project expires, they also leave. Unless you get another extension or another project, then they can, they can switch to that.*¹⁸³

Other organisations operated on a primarily voluntary basis. Another interviewee, introduced in section 6.4, above, was the director of a membership-based organisation. The organisation had around 50 members, who, in theory, paid regular subscriptions, though like many membership-

¹⁸² Interview, 19 August 2019 (d)

¹⁸³ Interview, 7 November 2021 (b)

based organisations, the economic crisis meant many were struggling to pay. Partly as a result of this, in recent years, they had also begun implementing small, occasional projects for international organisations. The director feels that this has exposed the organisation in a positive way. He explains that they ‘move faster’ when they have international support, but continue working either way. This support, again, takes the form of a subcontract; international organisations, he says, will contract you when *“there are some projects that they cannot implement, then you implement it for them. And in this way, now, you keep the organisation active. If there are no projects that we are implementing, we’d be sitting in the office, doing some small, small activities, like radio talk show, and public short messages, announcement and all this. And now meanwhile, we’re attending cluster meetings, we’re sharing information, and so forth.”* In such cases, he says, *“the funding comes from the project, it doesn’t come like, this ‘this is your funding, use it the way you want it’. It comes with the project, and it is very limited.”* When a project comes, he says,

*What I do, I just call the volunteers, who are lying, I call them back, ‘now there is a work’, I give them positions based on the project requirements. And then we run the project, the project is over, they go back to sleep, or they go back to hibernation [laughs]. And I mean, I don’t hibernate. Because if I do, it collapse. And I like it!*¹⁸⁴

He greatly enjoys his role, he says, *“because I’m seeing I’m contributing, and I’m playing a role in making a change happen.”* Another interviewee, the director of a small sub-national NGO, said *“the best strategy is for your staff to be multi-skilled, you know, to do something, if the project is not running, it should be able to sell his time. Any other opportunity coming across. Even if he’s on the projects, and doing 50% of the work, they should be able also to participate, you know, even in the teaching, the assessment, the surveys”*.¹⁸⁵ Organisations also had to navigate the use of volunteers carefully, ensuring that they were not raising expectations of future salaried employment that they would not be able to meet.

The short-term nature of employment is one of the biggest differences between NGO and government work. Government-paid positions (including civil servants, teachers and others) were more likely to be long-term, and so leaving government-paid positions for short-term work in NGOs entailed a trade-off. South Sudan’s economic crisis and the collapse of the South Sudanese pound meant that this trade-off had swung heavily in favour of NGO work, as discussed in chapter five. One interviewee, for example, was a former teacher and university

¹⁸⁴ Interview, 3 December 2021 (a)

¹⁸⁵ Interview, 27 October 2021

official, currently working for a sub-national NGO; he hoped to return to working at the university in the future, because this, he says, *“is a permanent job, and a good institution”*. The problem was that at the university the salary was often delayed – *“you can spend six months or seven months without any money even”*; at the NGO he works for, he says, at least the money is coming on time. However, he hopes to return to a job at the university, because it is permanent, whereas, at the organisation he works for, *“any time, maybe their donors are not there, it can be collapsed”*. Indeed, the previous year, his salary had been reduced by around a third, a loss to him of over 200 USD per month. What he had heard from the executive director was that *“the donors they are withdrawing 60% of the funding. That is why is reduced some. Also is making downsizing for the staff also because there is no money”*.¹⁸⁶

This relates to another, crucial point: that this is a workforce that is often affected by decisions made far from South Sudan, and that is directly affected by budget cuts and austerity in donor countries. Between periods of research in 2020 and 2021, several organisations had experienced large cuts to their budgets, and there was, more generally, a sense amongst interlocutors by 2021 that funding was becoming harder to access. This was attributed to numerous factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the cuts to FCDO budgets in South Sudan,¹⁸⁷ and, more generally, a sense that overall humanitarian funding was shrinking. This is supported by existing data: overall international humanitarian assistance to South Sudan fell by 10% between 2020 and 2021, while humanitarian needs, including severe food insecurity, rose during the same period (Development Initiatives, 2022).

There were numerous examples of organisations shrinking during this period, often for a combination of different reasons, including the reprioritisation of resources during the pandemic and the reductions in aid funding. One interviewee, for example, a Juba-based employee of a national NGO, said that, during this period, there were *“lots of things that were happening, funders were withdrawing funding, and with COVID, countries would not send money... they were all equally hit by the COVID. And the South Sudan Humanitarian Fund became more competitive, the international NGOs*

¹⁸⁶ Interview, 3 December 2021 (b)

¹⁸⁷ Funding from the UK government, which has been a major donor to humanitarian, health, education and other programmes in South Sudan for many years, fell significantly: from a spend of £190.6 million in South Sudan in 2019-20, to £135.3 million in 2020-21, to a budget of £68.4 million in 2021-22 (Brown et al., 2022). Six of the FCDO's seven programmes in South Sudan, six were modified, and spending on the Humanitarian Programme fell from £90 million to £35 million (Brien & Loft, 2023). Though few South Sudanese NGOs received funds from the FCDO directly, several received FCDO funds as subcontractors through international intermediaries.

jumped into competing more.” Around two-thirds of the staff in the organisation he worked for had lost their jobs, and his own salary had been halved.¹⁸⁸

Another interviewee, introduced above, worked in the sub-national office of a national NGO. The organisation had lost significant funding, which he attributes largely to COVID-19, because their programmes were not health related. He himself had not been paid for several months. He now had a ‘lot of debts’ and was struggling to pay his children’s school fees. The number of staff working in the local office had fallen from over 30 to less than five, with those remaining working on a voluntary basis to try and keep some small activities going. He recounts, *“even the communities are demanding us to be back by all means, but we told them it is not in our hands of course”*. The international organisation that was their main funder in the area had suggested that the partnership could be resumed soon; so, he says, *“simply we are living on hope, that maybe if these signed documents now, if everything goes well, that is where now we’ll interview newcomers and begin afresh.”* Having lost many of the people he had spent significant time training was frustrating – it is like *“taking me backwards”*. Nonetheless, he says, *“this is the reality of the humanitarian world, because nobody is there forever”*. Despite the challenges and frustrations of the last few months, he was glad to work for the organisation, because, he says, *“I’m doing the work I love”*.¹⁸⁹

The brunt of shrinking aid is of course borne by those directly affected by humanitarian crises, including the millions of people in South Sudan struggling with severe food insecurity. Nonetheless, the impact on South Sudanese aid workers (including staff of both South Sudanese and international organisations), many of whom are supporting extended families with their salaries, is also significant. These examples highlight again the tenuousness of the prosperity that can be gained through NGO employment.

7.6. Entrepreneurialism and the turn to the market

South Sudanese NGO actors are not passive participants in these processes. They adopt an array of different approaches to navigate the challenges posed by a funding architecture structured around short-term subcontracts. For example, many of the directors of South Sudanese NGOs that I spoke to described either current or planned future efforts to establish some form of market-oriented income generating activity for their organisations. This was typically couched in terms of a desire for greater organisational independence, as well as being linked to efforts to

¹⁸⁸ Interview, 21 November 2021 (b)

¹⁸⁹ Interview, 2 December 2021

navigate short-term subcontracts, and to concerns about actual and anticipated cuts to international humanitarian assistance to South Sudan. This reflects Peck's observations around the entrepreneurial strategies and diverse financial networks of civil society organisations in the eastern Caribbean, which, she argues, were not only a response to donor withdrawal, but also a way of challenging *"the power-geometries of development systems and the parent-child model of financing"* (Peck, 2019: 464).

The turn to more market-oriented funding strategies took different forms in South Sudan. The director of one large, Juba-based national NGO, for example, explained that they had taxis that operated in the capital, and generator jets for washing cars. They had been able to buy these using overhead saved from previous projects. The income that this raised was used as contingency money for the organisation; as a result, he said, *"when there is no funding, we have no problem. We continue running the office here. The staff are here."*¹⁹⁰ They used the funding primarily to cover the running costs of the office, and the administrative costs of the organisation. They were planning, next, to buy land in order to build offices that other NGOs could rent from them, to provide another source of income.

Another interviewee was the director of a long-established national NGO, operating primarily in the north of the country. He had been doing this work for over a decade, and was proud of what he had achieved, but was thinking about what he will do next. Before he leaves, however, he wants to establish income generating activities to sustain the organisation, because, he explains,

*The NGOs that we have now, they are getting funding directly from donors, and that is not sustainable, and you will also be manipulated just to be running after money... I need to make [this organisation] not only like being run through donors, but it should have the capacity to be able to generate its own income to run it.*¹⁹¹

In one of their sub-national offices, they have built accommodation and a training hall, which can be hired for a fee, generating income for the organisation. This keeps the office running between projects. He has taken inspiration from the Kenya Red Cross, which has constructed hotels to generate income for the organisation. The organisation is now seeking to acquire land in order to build further accommodation and training facilities. Several other organisations

¹⁹⁰ Interview, 28 October 2021 (a)

¹⁹¹ Interview, 10 November 2021 (b)

similarly had accommodation and meeting spaces in their sub-national offices that could be rented out, often to visiting NGO staff, generating a small amount of income and helping to fund the costs of these offices.

Amongst national NGOs, there were numerous other examples of efforts to diversify funding. The director of one relatively small, environment-focused NGO, for example, explained how the organisation kept and bred chickens in their compound, which generated, he said, ‘a lot of money’; this was now the ‘sustainability plan’ for the organisation. In addition, the director had founded a private consultancy company, with the aim being that the company can “*fill in the gaps*” in the NGO, because, he says, donations are not ‘predictable’ in the NGO world.¹⁹²

Another interviewee, the director of one very rapidly-growing NGO, argued that, “*when you commit to opening up opportunities for people, you've got to make sure that that continues trickling, so you, your head has to keep working 24 hours, so that there's no job loss at some point*”; as a result, she said, you had to be ‘creative’ and ‘innovative’ or risk closing down. The organisation was seeking to diversify funds and raise income in numerous different ways. For example, they were working with women’s groups in local areas to process shea butter and honey; they link these groups to markets and keep a small portion of the proceeds to support the organisation “*as a fundraising strategy so that we're able to continue supporting these processes for other groups across the country*.”¹⁹³ They had also been relatively successful in raising funds from private companies outside South Sudan.

One national NGO had established a sister company offering microfinance loans, primarily to women, which supports the organisation when there is no funding; in addition, the director explained, “*we also encourage our staff, if they have their own businesses, they can be borrowing from this company*”.¹⁹⁴ Two other organisations were considering doing something similar.¹⁹⁵

Numerous smaller organisations had tables, chairs, tents and sound systems that were rented out for events, using the money raised to sustain their offices, and to facilitate small activities that were not easily funded. Several others grew and sold seedlings to provide income to the organisation. One relatively small NGO, for example, grew fruit trees. They sold the seedlings to

¹⁹² Interview, 12 November 2021 (b)

¹⁹³ Interview, 8 December 2021

¹⁹⁴ Interview, 19 November 2021 (b)

¹⁹⁵ It is worth noting that there are reasons for caution around microfinance in South Sudan. A scaling up of individual microfinance schemes risks deepening people’s economic precarity; as Diing et al. (2021:7) argue, individual microfinance “*often leaves people more dependent on fluctuating markets and uncertain returns to service personal debt*”.

NGOs and government offices for a small fee, but would give them away free to community members. They might have upwards of 3,000 seedlings growing at a time, depending on the season. The money raised pays for a gardener, seeds and some equipment, to keep the garden going, and pays the office support staff, such as the cleaner and guards.¹⁹⁶

Most of these initiatives relied upon some form of existing economic capital. In some cases, this was possible because at some point in the past, the organisation had had funding that had enabled them to purchase assets, including through some of the larger civil society support programmes that operated between the 2005 CPA and the outbreak of conflict in 2013. For others, this was possible because they had been supported over extended periods of time by partnership-based international NGOs, that had consistently provided them with reliable overheads and supported them to purchase assets. In other cases, capital came from the founders' own savings. As a result, although the desire to establish some kind of income generation project was widespread, the extent to which this was possible in practice varied significantly between organisations, potentially reflecting and replicating existing inequalities in access to resources. In addition, generally, the funds raised were small, and were dwarfed by the funds available through international subcontracts.

Nonetheless, this points to some of the ways in which organisations sought to navigate the uncertainty of short-term subcontracts, and the challenges of an increasingly competitive humanitarian arena. Finally, this discussion returns us to the pervasive influence of neoliberalism: as Peck argues, in relation to civil society groups in the Caribbean, the shift towards entrepreneurialism “*dovetails with the encouragement of entrepreneurial attitudes in development processes and indeed wider society*”, linked to expanding neoliberal ideologies and the individualisation of responsibility (Peck, 2019: 454).

7.7. Conclusion

Through the structure of the subcontract, an increasing amount of the day-to-day, frontline labour of aid in South Sudan is undertaken by the staff of subcontracted South Sudanese organisations. Many of the interviewees quoted in this chapter, overall, greatly enjoyed their work, feeling that they were contributing to change and making a difference in South Sudan. They were privileged in numerous ways, with salaries that were unavailable to most of the South Sudanese citizenry. At the same time, the short-term nature of many contracts meant that their

¹⁹⁶ Interview, 27 October 2021

employment was almost always highly uncertain. Through subcontracts, South Sudanese NGOs effectively offer a form of ‘just-in-time’ staffing to international organisations. The pressure to secure subcontracts in an intensely competitive humanitarian arena also places downward pressure on wages and leads organisations to accept funding with unfavourable terms. The prominence of relatively prescriptive subcontracts, rather than more flexible grants, also meant that interviewees often felt they ended up implementing work largely designed by international organisations, as similarly described in the 1990s and 2000s (Karim et al., 1996; Bennett et al., 2010).

Short-term funding was also felt to undermine programme quality and sustainability, leading to gaps and delays in the provision of aid and limiting the prospects for longer-term programming, it as well as making it harder to build and maintain trust with local communities in areas of operation. This, in turn, demands significant affective and relational labour from South Sudanese NGO actors, who seek to sustain a presence, maintain relationships, manage expectations and, in various other ways, to ‘smooth’ the gaps between intermittent funding. This resonates with the findings of several recent studies, which have highlighted that a significant amount of affective and relational labour is performed by local humanitarian workers; this labour is often unacknowledged and unremunerated, and yet is integral to making aid ‘work’ (James, 2020; Pascucci, 2019; Peters, 2020). Part of the reason this goes unnoticed, Sundberg (2020) points out, is because it is not easily quantifiable and does not make it into written documents.

8. Conclusions

8.1. The labour of localisation

Labour dynamics in the international humanitarian industry are changing, in South Sudan and around the world. This thesis argues that we need to pay greater attention to the labour of aid and to the nature of work in the humanitarian industry. This includes examining people's working lives and conditions, as well as understanding how labour dynamics influence and intersect with class hierarchies and inequalities, within aid organisations and in the contexts in which they are operating. In this way, the thesis builds on the work of Fechter and Hindman (2011), which called for greater examination of the labour of aid and the day-to-day experiences of aid workers, but which focused predominantly on the experiences of international aid workers, who constitute a small minority of the global aid workforce.

As explored in the introduction, understanding who aid workers are, how they are positioned, and how they navigate, approach and experience their work, is crucial: not only because this has a direct bearing on the outcomes and consequences – intended and unintended – of aid (Fechter, 2012a; Smirl, 2015), but also because it sheds light on the ways in which inequalities can be reproduced through the structures of the international humanitarian industry (Peters, 2016; Pascucci, 2019), and because it provides insights into, and raises important questions about, the changing nature of work in contemporary societies (Roth, 2015b). While recent work has begun to shift anthropological and academic attention away from the experiences of expatriate staff and towards the nationally-contracted workers who constitute the majority of aid workers worldwide (see James, 2020; Pascucci, 2019; Ward, 2021), this thesis argues for greater attention to the experiences of those running and working for subcontracted, domestic NGOs, and to the ways in which labour dynamics within these organisations and in the wider humanitarian industry are being (re)shaped by the drive towards localisation and locally led aid.

In South Sudan's humanitarian arena, momentum has gathered over the last decade around the drive for 'localisation', reflected in a plethora of commitments and agreements, events, reports, programmes and initiatives, networks and advocacy platforms. This has created opportunities and openings for some South Sudanese NGOs, predominantly larger organisations that are already well-placed to meet international donors' complex due diligence requirements. However, it has had little impact on systemic and structural inequalities and power dynamics within the humanitarian system in South Sudan, or on direct, trackable funding, a conclusion supported by recent research in other contexts (see, e.g., Baguios et al., 2021; Banks et al., 2023; Development

Initiatives, 2023; Elkahlout et al., 2022). Localisation was understood by many of my interlocutors as a promise of structural change, including a substantive increase in direct funding for local and national NGOs, which has not transpired. The lack of meaningfully felt change has led to substantial frustration and mistrust amongst South Sudanese NGOs, reflected in the assertion that localisation is ‘just a song’.

Instead, ‘localisation’ in South Sudan has largely taken the form of an expansion of top-down subcontracting of South Sudanese NGOs, often on relatively short-term, prescriptive contracts. This is being shaped and driven in part by access and cost constraints, as well as by shifting donor incentives, resonating with the situation Barter and Sumlut (2023) describe as a ‘low quality localisation’. This creates opportunities for some South Sudanese NGOs to engage with and access resources from the international humanitarian system, but does so without changing the way in which that system operates. International organisations dictate the terms of inclusion in this system, with South Sudanese actors encouraged and incentivised to adopt the structures, policies and practices of their international counterparts. Their engagement in this system is structured around competition for short-term subcontracts in a highly competitive humanitarian arena, reflecting wider trends towards managerialism and the projectisation of aid that promote a focus on short-term results (Girei, 2016, 2023; Krause, 2014). Meanwhile longer-term, flexible funding for South Sudanese organisations, enabling them to respond more directly to the priorities of the communities they work with and to invest in longer-term visions of transformation and change, remains exceedingly rare. South Sudanese organisations navigate these challenges in an array of ways, as explored in chapter seven, but in doing so find themselves working against, rather than with, the pressures and incentives of the existing system.

Crucially, as this thesis has shown, the way in which ‘localisation’ is interpreted and enacted, and the structures and systems through which NGOs are funded, have important implications for people’s working lives and conditions. A prevalence of short-term, project-based subcontracts as the primary mode of engagement between international actors and domestic NGOs also means a prevalence of short-term, project-based employment, creating significant uncertainty and insecurity for NGO staff. There are significant pressures on domestic NGOs, both implicit and explicit, to keep costs low, placing downward pressure on wages. This is particularly the case in a highly competitive funding environment, in which domestic NGOs are situated at or near the bottom of long subcontracting chains, and in which many organisations are competing for a relatively small pool of funding.

The thesis suggests that this can be analysed as a form of subcontracted employment (Wills, 2009), in which workers are distanced from the people who, to a significant degree, determine the conditions of their work. This is particularly the case where ‘localisation’ takes the form of an expansion of top-down subcontracts, in which domestic NGOs have limited influence over programme design and budgets. In this way, domestic NGOs end up effectively providing a form of ‘just-in-time’ staffing (Rao, 2017) to international organisations, in which workers are engaged on a short-term basis, as and when needed. In many ways, international organisations continue to shape the rhythms of their employment, dictating – implicitly or explicitly – their pay, benefits and contract length. This demands substantial flexibility from domestic NGOs and their staff, in the face of intermittent and unpredictable subcontracts, while limiting their ability to support, invest in and retain staff, and to strengthen organisational capacity. Again, different individuals and organisations adopt different strategies to navigate these challenges, but with few alternative sources of funding and intense competition for subcontracts, space for negotiation is limited. This is not an argument against ‘localisation’ and locally led aid but rather for a deeper, more transformative approach, as discussed below.

Localisation is an international policy agenda, and the subcontract is a pervasive global technology. It is therefore likely these findings have a degree of generalisability, particularly to other contexts in which there is a large-scale, protracted international humanitarian presence. Indeed, the findings of this thesis resonate with studies in other contexts, highlighting the precarity of the ‘local labour’ on which the international humanitarian industry relies (see, e.g., Ong & Combinido, 2018; Pascucci, 2019; Ward, 2021), manifested in short-term contracts and insecure employment, in exposure to physical harm, and in the performance of (often unrecognised and unremunerated) affective and relational labour. While these studies have typically focused on the experiences of locally contracted staff working directly for international organisations, this thesis shows that these dynamics are also evident in the experiences of individuals working for domestic, subcontracted NGOs.

The evidence presented in this thesis also resonates with Silke Roth’s assertion that aid work in some ways epitomises the nature of work in contemporary neoliberal societies, including in terms of short-term, project-based employment, in the pervasiveness of audit cultures and managerialism, and in the demands placed on workers for flexibility, resilience and self-governance (Roth, 2015b). The findings also support Roth’s assertion that NGOs and aid

organisations are ‘greedy organisations’, demanding a great deal of their staff: in time (both paid and unpaid), in emotional labour and in the demands placed on personal lives. While Roth’s work focuses predominantly on the experiences of highly mobile international aid workers, this thesis shows these dynamics manifest in a labour market in a specific national context, in complex, contradictory ways. This, in turn, draws attention to the ways in which aid operations intersect with wider political economy dynamics in specific contexts, producing, shaping and dictating access to new labour markets and employment opportunities, and influencing personal and professional aspirations. As Brown and Green write, in relation to the professionalisation of volunteer work in Kenya and Tanzania, *“what is at stake in these transformations is not simply the emergence of new labor markets that generate particular kinds of exclusion and opportunity, but changes in the constitution of work itself that relate to the form of people’s engagements within new global economies”* (Brown & Green, 2015: 79).

In South Sudan, this work is characterised by a particular interplay of precarity and privilege. In many ways, those engaged in paid work with NGOs and aid organisations (both national and international) in South Sudan occupy a relatively privileged position. In a context of economic scarcity and deep inequality, NGO employment represents a rare source of salaried income, and can provide opportunities for personal and professional advancement. This can be transformative for those employed and for their wider families. The sharing of salaries across kin and social networks creates opportunities to strengthen relationships and social standing, as well as new tensions and pressures, as explored in chapter five. Interviewees also often narrated that their work could be highly rewarding, enabling them to feel that they were contributing to change in their communities and in the country, as well as creating opportunities for learning and influence, as reflected in the narratives of commitment, sacrifice and struggle discussed in chapter six.

At the same time, this work is often uncertain and insecure. Employment is often bound to specific, short-term projects, generating considerable stress, both for employees and for those seeking to run, manage and maintain organisations. Those navigating aid industry employment in South Sudan must become ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ (Freeman, 2012), learning new skills, gaining new qualifications and accumulating work experience in order to remain employed in a hyper-competitive labour market. Few people engaged only in NGO work, with many holding multiple roles and adopting different strategies to mitigate the unpredictability of NGO employment. Those working for or running smaller, less well-funded organisations, or in more

junior positions, struggled to invest in land, buildings or businesses, or in further education, finding that meeting the needs of immediate (and often extended) family members – for food, education and healthcare – quickly absorbed all their salary. They struggled to meet expectations for support, balancing the severity and immediacy of different people’s needs with a desire to invest in and prepare for the future: to pay for further education, buy land or build rooms in one’s home, for example. Once more immediate needs had been met, they often found money ‘cannot accumulate’, as explored in chapter five.

The thesis therefore cautions against generalisations of the experiences and positionalities of those engaged in NGO work in South Sudan, including blanket assessments of either the privilege *or* the precarity of those engaged in NGO employment. It points to the significant heterogeneity of those engaged in NGO work, including in terms of wealth and class position, which, amongst other things, influenced people’s experiences of and ability to navigate and mitigate the uncertainty of NGO work. Life-work histories, embedded in a wider actor-oriented approach, proved to be a useful tool to explore these dynamics, providing nuanced insights into the variety of experiences of, motivations for and perspectives on NGO work, and the ways in which these change over time.

The analysis presented in this thesis thus points to both the salience and complexity of class as a lens of analysis in studies of labour dynamics in the humanitarian industry. This is far more complex than notions of a straightforward ‘NGO elite’ or ‘NGO class’ (c.f. Petras, 1999; Schuller, 2009). The reality is more akin to Mercer and Lemanski’s (2020) depictions of the precarious prosperity associated with ‘middle-classness’, with class understood not as a fixed category but rather as a heterogeneous, shifting ‘classification-in-the-making’ (Mercer & Lemanski, 2020; Spronk, 2018). A focus on class draws attention to the conditions of possibility, and to the structural and systemic factors, that enable some to secure NGO employment, and the opportunities for socio-economic mobility that (can) accompany this, as well as the forms of capital and connections that are required to succeed in the NGO sphere. The thesis also highlights the pervasive gendered inequalities that persist within the aid industry in South Sudan, shaping both access to employment for prospective staff and access to funding and support for women-led NGOs. Despite a widespread commitment to gender equality enshrined in the work of many international development and humanitarian organisations, aid organisations worldwide remain gendered organisations, in which women are underrepresented in leadership positions, and receive fewer privileges and opportunities than men (Roy, 2024). Gendered inequalities in

the aid industry in South Sudan also have important intersectional dimensions, overlapping and interacting with inequalities along the lines of class, education, wealth and rurality.

8.2. Re-historicising and contextualising localisation

Reports and papers on localisation and locally led often allude to the fact that these are not new ideas in the humanitarian system, even if the language has changed and the momentum accelerated. At the same time, it is relatively rare to find reports on localisation that substantively address the longer-term histories and impacts of these ideas and interventions in the specific contexts being studied, nor that are rooted, more broadly, in a deeper analysis and engagement with the history and political economy of particular places. Yet, this deeper historical and contextual perspective is crucial. In relation to South Sudan, for example, it is difficult to understand the frustrations around contemporary localisation discourses without acknowledging the history of similar rhetoric, including long-standing discourses around the need for ‘capacity building’, or the longevity of the sense that a certain proportion of aid funding earmarked for South Sudan, to paraphrase Prah (1984), never really ‘sinks into the ground’ for the long-term benefit of the South Sudanese people. Similarly, it is hard to understand what is truly at stake in localisation processes without understanding the social, economic and political position of NGOs and NGO employment in South Sudan’s political economy.

The thesis therefore argues strongly for the need to contextualise and ‘re-historicise’ localisation (c.f. Lewis, 2009), looking beyond recent commitments and events and recognising historical continuities and patterns. In South Sudan, this includes recognising and learning from past reform processes, programmes and initiatives that have sought to ‘localise’ international humanitarian interventions, including their successes and limitations, so as to avoid repeating past mistakes or reinventing the wheel, as well as understanding the historical dynamics shaping the South Sudanese NGO and civil society landscape.

In highlighting historical continuities in the localisation agenda in South Sudan, my aim is not to suggest that there is “*nothing new under the sun*” (Lewis, 2009: 35), that contemporary dynamics and discourses around localisation are identical to those of the past, or that change is impossible. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that efforts to ‘localise’ aid have been part of relief operations in South Sudan for decades, in different ways and with different terminology, and with complex effects. This has long been bound up with discourses around sustainability and self-reliance, as well as with efforts to navigate insecurity in South(ern) Sudan and to cut costs in

the face of overstretched aid budgets. This also underscores the persistence of the challenges discussed in relation to ‘localisation’ in South Sudan, including the issues posed by inequitable partnerships, short-term funding and top-down, subcontracting approaches to working with South Sudanese organisations. For example, assessments of the impact of aid to South Sudan in the years following the 2005 CPA highlight both the prevalence and the limitations of a top-down, subcontracting approach to engagement with South Sudanese NGOs, trapping them in short-term funding cycles that limit organisational capacity and undermine their presence in particular locations (Bennett et al., 2010), and leaving them feeling that they are “*unequal partners in the development of their own country*” (Schomerus & Allen, 2010: 94).

This, in turn, can be situated within a longer history of efforts amongst external interveners to ‘localise’ their operations in South Sudan. From colonial administrators in the nineteenth century to international donors in the twentieth, external actors have long sought to ground their authority and foster local legitimacy by contracting with, and shaping, local actors, as explored in chapter three. There have also been a plethora of programmes, projects and initiatives intended to build on, strengthen and support ‘local capacities’, dating back to at least the 1990s. This has done little to change the narrative that South Sudanese NGOs ‘lack capacity’, which remains, in the words of one interlocuter, like a ‘national anthem’. This, in turn, is indicative of the challenges in the way in which ‘capacity’ is understood, defined and assessed, which perpetuates inequalities between local and international actors (see Barbelet, 2019; Barbelet et al., 2021; Eade, 2007).

Finally, a historical perspective also helps counter the assumption that South Sudan was a ‘blank state’ at independence in 2011, starting from nothing (Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017), and to challenge presumptions about a lack of experience and capacity amongst South Sudanese NGOs and civil society organisations. Amongst other things, engagement with this history demonstrates the wealth of knowledge, experience and expertise within South Sudanese NGOs, amongst South Sudanese aid professionals, and in wider South Sudanese civil society, including that gained from many years or decades of involvement in humanitarian relief efforts, service delivery, community organising and activism, in different capacities. Again, life-work history interviews proved to be a powerful tool here, enabling analysis that looks beyond the relative youth of many NGOs, instead considering the varied, longer-term educational and career trajectories, aspirations and experiences of their directors, volunteers and staff.

8.3. Implications for policy and practice

Many of the challenges this thesis points to are rooted in long-standing structural and systemic inequalities within the aid industry, and in the international political economy more broadly. These are unlikely to be addressed through short-term interventions or one-size-fits-all policy prescriptions, especially when these run counter to incentives for organisational survival and growth.¹⁹⁷ The thesis itself points to the limitations of a shallow, tick-box approach to ‘localisation’, which risks entrenching unequal power dynamics, both in the international aid industry and in South Sudanese (civil) society, while transferring physical, financial and reputational risks to organisations and individuals further down the aid chain. Instead, there is a need for a far deeper, more nuanced approach to supporting locally led aid in South Sudan: one that goes beyond prescriptive, short-term subcontracts and towards a more meaningful shift of power and resources to diverse South Sudanese actors, in a way that creates space for their ideas, initiatives and ways of working, and that enables them to respond more directly to the needs, priorities and preferences of the communities they work with. This requires a commitment to structural change and transformation within the aid industry, including a willingness to examine and change organisational cultures and established ways of working. This, in turn, is more likely to be achieved through an approach to locally led aid that is driven and shaped by notions of equity and solidarity, and that is grounded in visions of longer-term, sustained and systemic change, than by an instrumental approach shaped by access and cost constraints.

Also important to recognise is that the politics of ‘localisation’ in South Sudan is immensely fraught, involving the distribution of power and resources in a context of profound economic precarity and deep inequality. Decisions about which organisations to fund and where, and how and for how long, have important implications for people’s lives and livelihoods, as well as for the balance of power in South Sudanese (civil) society. These are not technical but inherently political decisions, with potential to either replicate or challenge dynamics of inequality and marginalisation in South Sudan. It is therefore imperative that shifts towards localisation and locally led aid in South Sudan are approached in a way that is context-specific and conflict-sensitive. This means ensuring that approaches to localisation and locally led aid are firmly rooted in understandings of South Sudanese context, history and political economy, and are attentive to the ways in which the structures and requirements of funding implicitly and explicitly privilege some actors and ways of working and exclude others. This requires open dialogue,

¹⁹⁷ As one interlocutor, the country director of an international NGO, commented, “*there is not a country director that I know of that works for an international NGO that put in their strategy or annual plan, that he or she would like to see the budget for their respective organization reduce over the next year to five years.*” (Interview, 28 November 2021).

ongoing reflection and in-depth research, processes best led by South Sudanese researchers, academics and practitioners.

In the short term, there are numerous ways in which international organisations could improve their approaches to working with South Sudanese organisations. First and foremost, a clear recommendation arising from this research is of the need to increase direct, high quality, flexible funding for South Sudanese NGOs and civil society organisations, in line with commitments made as part of the Grand Bargain, as well as to ensure better tracking of funding across the aid chain in order to assess progress towards these commitments (see also Girling-Morris et al., 2022). Aid donors should seek to identify and support innovative approaches to increasing direct funding for South Sudanese actors and alternatives to subcontracting, such as by supporting locally instigated, led and managed pooled funds, networks and consortia. This needs to be undertaken in a way that is sensitive to dynamics of class, inequality and marginalisation within South Sudan and that is proactively inclusive of groups that are more likely to be marginalised or excluded, including women-led organisations, organisations led by and representing people with disabilities, and smaller, community-led organisations in more rural and remote parts of the country. This might mean ringfencing funding for certain groups, adapting application processes and reporting requirements, translating calls for funding into relevant languages and ensuring these are also disseminated offline, and proactively reaching out beyond the established networks, structures and processes of the humanitarian system.

Improving the quality of funding available to South Sudanese actors and the equitability of partnerships with intermediary organisations is crucial, particularly given that intermediaries are likely to play a considerable role for the foreseeable future. Flexible, multi-year funding¹⁹⁸ would make a significant difference to South Sudanese organisations and to their employees, enabling greater predictability of employment while retaining space to adapt to changing situations. This would also support organisations to invest in their presence in particular locations, to build and maintain trust with local communities in areas of operation and to pursue longer term visions of change. It would also help to reduce the administrative burden (and considerable stress) associated with regularly seeking to secure, deliver and report on short-term projects. Linked to this is the importance of ensuring equitable access to overheads and support for core

¹⁹⁸ The provision of increased multi-year funding has been a priority within international humanitarian reform processes since the 2016 WHS, and the volume of multi-year funding being provided by donors has increased (Metcalf-Hough et al., 2023). However, the extent to which the benefits of multi-year funding are being passed on by larger international organisations to local and national organisations appears limited (though this is also difficult to track with available data) (ibid).

organisational costs, widely acknowledged as crucial to supporting and sustaining institutional capacity,¹⁹⁹ and of ensuring that South Sudanese organisations have the resources they need to work safely and effectively. Donors should monitor and assess the performance of intermediary organisations on this basis, including the extent to which they pass on the benefits of multi-year funding and overheads to the organisations they fund. As demonstrated within this thesis, all these factors have implications not just for the work of South Sudanese NGOs, but also for the working lives and conditions of their staff.

More broadly, this thesis highlights the importance of recognising the role of aid organisations as employers, and of ensuring that domestic NGOs engaged in delivering humanitarian relief have the quality and consistency of resources they need to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their staff, and, as far as possible, to promote greater predictability of employment. Recognising the role of aid organisations as employers also means recognising the significant ways in which aid organisations become a part of, and reshape, local labour markets, examining how this might interact with existing power dynamics and inequalities, and considering how to improve inclusivity in hiring practices. International organisations also need to consider how to ensure the progression of South Sudanese staff and their representation at senior levels, as well as to examine and address the inequalities, biases and power dynamics that might implicitly or explicitly limit their decision-making power and influence.

Further research could usefully investigate the different factors that enable domestic NGOs to hold international organisations accountable to commitments that they have made, to challenge inequitable partnerships and advocate for better terms. The research conducted for this thesis, for example, indicated the importance of open lines of communication, not just between donors and intermediary organisations, but also between donors and sub-granted or subcontracted organisations further down the ‘aid chain’, enabling greater trust, transparency and dialogue around the nature and quality of subcontracting arrangements. Relatedly, a degree of financial independence, whether derived from membership fees, income generation projects, or by having a diversity of donors (and thus being less reliant on any one donor or intermediary organisation)

¹⁹⁹ Overhead costs are “critical for building the organisational capacity, sustainability and preparedness of frontline responders” (Girling-Morris, 2023: 2). They enable organisations to manage risks, invest in and retain staff, build up reserves and develop and strengthen organisational systems, and ultimately support more efficient and effective humanitarian programming (ibid). Approaches to the provision of overheads vary between organisations (ibid). Recent research and guidelines provide examples of good practice in this area, including ensuring that overheads are provided as unrestricted funding (as opposed to itemised overhead), are not time-limited, are provided in addition to administrative and project support costs, and are guided by transparent policies (IASC & Development Initiatives, 2022).

also tended to place organisations in a better position to negotiate or reject poor quality funding or inequitable partnerships. Efforts to establish income generation strategies and businesses were common amongst South Sudanese NGOs and were often described as a way of ensuring more predictable funding and a greater degree of independence from international donors. Further research could usefully explore the possibilities, risks and limitations of these strategies.

The research conducted for this thesis also indicated the importance of collective action between and amongst South Sudanese organisations and pointed to the potential for change when fostered collaboratively amongst networks and consortia. This included examples of sub-national networks of NGOs and CBOs coming together to advocate for inclusion in aid interventions in the local area on more equitable terms, and examples of national and sub-nationally based organisations successfully applying for funding as consortia. There are also examples of South Sudanese NGO actors drawing on the lexicon of localisation to advocate for change, or to challenge the terms of particular contracts. At the same time, the prospects for collective and collaborative action are significantly limited by the intense competition for funding, as well as by constraints on civic space that undermine trust and open communication between organisations. For South Sudanese organisations, finding further ways to foster collaboration and collective action, and to advocate together for better terms, may help enhance bargaining power. The prospects for further collective action or collective bargaining amongst South Sudanese organisations would be a useful subject for further research, perhaps through a form of collaborative action research, in a way that creates space for further discussion around and collective advocacy for more genuinely locally led aid in South Sudan.

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