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Beyond Sudan's big day

What next for one of the least developed places on earth?

The referendum is one of the most important events in Sudan's history – where southerners will vote whether to remain part of Africa's largest nation or to secede and become the world's newest independent country.

The stakes are extremely high, as are hopes for the future. Regardless of the outcome, all of Sudan, not just the south, will face major challenges over the coming months and years. It will need long-term support from the international community if there is to be lasting peace and development.

Beyond Sudan's big day there should be three priorities: tackling poverty and providing basic services such as schools and healthcare; guaranteeing emergency relief to help communities deal with crises; and protecting civilians from violence while addressing the root causes of conflict.

Southern Sudan – one of the least developed places on earth

Southern Sudan may be about to become the world's newest nation – but also one of its least developed. Decades of war, neglect and mass displacement have left southern Sudan home to some of the world's poorest people. Nevertheless, southern Sudan has tremendous potential.

Southerners hoped that the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) – which brought an end to one of Africa's longest and bloodiest wars – would also bring development to the towns and villages. There have been significant, if fragile, gains. The semiautonomous Government of Southern Sudan was established, and relative stability allowed many of those displaced by the war to return home. Local markets and trade with neighbouring countries have expanded.

However, many people have been left disappointed with the pace of change. Now, with the referendum about to take place, expectations for the future are even higher.

A deadly place to be a mother

For many women in southern Sudan, giving birth can mean death. One in seven women die during pregnancy and more mothers die during childbirth here than anywhere else in the world apart from Sierra Leone.

Even children who survive a dangerous birth face a struggle for life. One in ten children die before their first birthday, a statistic which places southern Sudan in the bottom ten countries in the world for infant mortality.

A missing education

During the decades of civil war, entire generations missed out on an education as schools were destroyed and families fled their villages. An estimated 80 percent of adults – including 92 percent of women – cannot read or write.

Southern Sudan has an extremely young population, with 51 percent under the age of 18. Yet many still do not go to school – less than two percent of children complete their primary education. Schools struggle with a lack of basic equipment and buildings, and there is a serious shortage of qualified teachers.

The search for clean water

Over half of people in southern Sudan do not have access to safe drinking water – they rely on seasonal pools and rivers that are often dirty and spread potentially fatal diseases such as cholera and diarrhoea. For many people, getting safe water means walking for several hours – a life-saving but arduous daily task which prevents children from going to school or adults from gaining employment.

Exposed to fatal diseases

Immunisation rates in southern Sudan are some of the lowest in the world. Malaria is hyper-endemic, yet four out of five families still do not have treated bed nets.

Southern Sudan: The facts

There are only 100 certified midwives in all of southern Sudan, serving an official population of at least 8.2 million.

Only one in ten deliveries is attended by a skilled birth attendant – the lowest rate in the world.

One in seven children who live past their first year die before the age of five.

A 15-year-old girl in southern Sudan has a higher chance of dying in childbirth than finishing her primary school education.

Less than half of children manage to complete five years of basic schooling.

Only a quarter of girls ever attend primary school.

Only one in 15 people has access to adequate sanitation facilities such as latrines, which increases the risk of diseases spreading.

Nine out of ten children are not fully vaccinated against the many prevalent diseases in the region.

Just 28 percent of children have received a measles vaccination by their first birthday – worldwide only Chad and Somalia have a rate of less than 40 percent.

The struggle to make ends meet

In 2010 around 4.3 million people – almost half the population – required food assistance at some stage during the year. 1.5 million of these people faced severe food shortages. Parts of southern Sudan have enormous agricultural potential, but years of conflict and a lack of modern storage facilities and transport networks make it difficult for people to maximise production. With barely any tarmac roads outside of the capital, large areas are cut off during the rainy season, posing serious challenges to trade within the region and with neighbouring countries.

In some areas insecurity has also hampered livelihoods. The state of Western Equatoria, for example, is an abundantly fertile area that could be the breadbasket of southern Sudan, but attacks by the brutal Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) have left farmers too scared to go to

their fields and trading routes too dangerous to use. As a result much of the food found in the markets of Juba, southern Sudan's capital and largest city, is trucked in from Uganda and Kenya.

Exposed to crisis

Every year across southern Sudan, drought, floods, disease and conflict push vulnerable communities into crisis. People are left without food, shelter, household belongings and access to safe water and sanitation, while emergencies often interrupt daily activities such as planting crops or attending school.

Returning – to what?

Since the end of October 2010 tens of thousands of southerners living in northern Sudan have travelled to the south, with more expected over the coming months. The sudden influx of people is placing enormous strain on local communities, where basic resources and services such as water, sanitation, food, education and shelter are already scarce.

What can be done? The international community must not neglect the long-term needs of Sudan once the referendum is over. The Government of Southern Sudan, with generous and long-term support from international donors, must tackle chronic underdevelopment and recurring humanitarian crises. Communities themselves must be at the heart of the process so their priorities are met and a real difference made to their daily lives.

Protecting people from violence

Many communities in southern Sudan still face the threat of violence. Fighting has forced more than 200,000 people to flee their homes in the past year and left almost 1,000 people dead. In 2009, almost 350,000 people were displaced by violence and 2,500 were killed – women and children often suffer the most.

The root causes of violence will not go away following the referendum. Fighting often erupts between ethnic groups due to competition over resources such as cattle, pasture and water points, made worse by unclear land rights. The scale of the violence is exacerbated by the legacies of war, including a high prevalence of small arms and a fledgling and ill-equipped security sector and justice system.

While the international community and the northern and southern Sudanese governments have been working to resolve high-level political issues – such as the voting process, the demarcation of the border, the sharing of oil revenues and national debt – some of the concerns of local communities are in danger of being overlooked. For example:

- There is a risk of increased tensions between pastoral communities, which migrate across the north-south border in search of water and grazing land, and the local population if grassroots needs are not addressed.
- All minority ethnic groups – such as the many southern Sudanese living in the cities of the north; northerners living in the south; and small ethnic groups often associated with “the other side” during the war – require reassurance that their needs will be met and their rights respected.

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) – Africa's most brutal and long-running rebel group with a reputation for massacres, abductions and horrific violence – also continues to terrorise areas bordering the Democratic Republic of Congo and Central African Republic. Attacks

have forced more than 42,000 people from their homes this year alone and prevented the delivery of vital aid and basic services. Isolated communities left without official protection have resorted to setting up youth defence groups known as the “Arrow Boys” – an understandable but dangerous short-term measure in a region where armed civilians have long been a source of insecurity.

The United Nations peacekeeping mission in Sudan (UNMIS) has so far failed to prioritise the protection of local people. Despite the challenges it faces, the mission must do more to quickly identify risks and respond effectively to outbreaks of violence.

State security services in southern Sudan are insufficiently trained, disciplined or equipped to effectively protect civilians – 90 percent of police officers are illiterate and communities are often better armed than the national police force.

What can be done? The Government of Southern Sudan, with the support of international donors, should continue to build the police force and justice system and support local peacebuilding initiatives to address the root causes of conflict and violence. The UN must prioritise the protection of local people and ensure resources are in place to really make communities safer. Strengthening the police service and the court system to address the concerns of local people is one of the most pressing matters for southern Sudan.

The world must not forget Darfur and northern Sudan

With all the focus on the possible secession of southern Sudan, it is often forgotten that the referendum could effectively create two new countries. Northern Sudan will also be affected by the outcome of the referendum and is facing many long-term challenges.

As international attention shifts, the ongoing crisis in Darfur is in danger of being neglected. Violence has increased significantly again over the past 12 months, with devastating consequences for civilians. Almost 270,000 people have been forced from their homes due to attacks on villages and clashes between government forces and the numerous rebel movements in 2010. Over three million people still live in camps and feel unsafe to return home.

Millions of people in Darfur rely on aid agencies for vital assistance – yet over the past 18 months it has become increasingly difficult and dangerous to reach people in need. Abductions of aid workers have spiralled out of control, forcing many agencies to restrict staff to the main towns. Some of the worst affected areas, such as the mountainous Jebel Marra region which has seen heavy fighting, have been inaccessible to aid workers.

The Darfur conflict is still far from resolution and the peace process remains distant from the communities most affected. This is symptomatic of a wider challenge across northern Sudan, where too many communities have faced years of neglect and marginalisation. Development has often failed to extend from the centre to the peripheries of the north, and there is a growing divide between rich and poor. In the post referendum period it will be more important than ever to address the needs of communities in remote and impoverished areas.

Eastern Sudan, for example, is one of the poorest and most neglected parts of the country, with extreme poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition. The East Sudan Peace Agreement has been blighted by the same frustrations as the CPA, with communities there yet to see much of the promised development, political representation and economic progress. Building a

peaceful northern Sudan will depend on whether regions such as the East and the north-south border areas have equitable access to resources and opportunities for development.

What can be done? International attention on the needs in the north must not wane during this crucial time.

Oxfam in Sudan

Oxfam has been working throughout Sudan since 1983, providing emergency aid and long-term development. In Darfur we supply clean water and sanitation to around 400,000 people in the vast camps, as well as helping to protect scarce natural resources and provide people with the skills and opportunities to earn an income.

In southern Sudan we work with communities in Warrap, Western Bahr el Ghazal, Lakes, Western Equatoria and Upper Nile states – providing safe water and sanitation, supporting local schools and supplying farmers with tools and training, and vaccinating livestock to improve livelihoods.

Throughout the country, including in eastern Sudan, we work with Sudanese civil society partners on issues such as women's rights to civic education and environmental management.

Further reading

Rescuing the peace in southern Sudan

<http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/rescuing-peace-southern-sudan>

Ghosts of Christmas Past: Protecting civilians from the LRA

<http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/ghosts-christmas-past>

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The following organization is linked to Oxfam International: Ucodep Campaign Office (Italy), email: ucodep-oi@oxfaminternational.org