



Degree Program in International Relations

Course of Demography and Social Challenges

Demography, Resources and Conflict in South Sudan:
Trends and Perspectives (2011-2035)

Prof. Alfonso Giordano

SUPERVISOR

Prof. Maria Rita Testa

CO-SUPERVISOR

Francesco Agnello (656972)

CANDIDATE

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ABSTRACT

In the examination of the reasons for which a country's past, present, and future are shaped in a determinate manner, it is pivotal to analyze the complex interplay between the plethora of involved demographic, socioeconomical, and political elements. In line with this academic interest, this work aims at investigating the extent to which causalities and correlations can be observed between three variables, framing potential patterns of association and interaction without assuming any linear or deterministic logic, employing the case study of one of the Horn of Africa's most interesting and fascinating countries: South Sudan. In particular, the considered variables are the demographic development of the world's youngest state (analyzed in the dimensions of population change and Youth Bulge), the continuous and unrelenting competition for natural resources (hereby defined through the contention over access, distribution, and control of water, oil, and other supplementary elements, critical for the citizenry's livelihood), and the enhancement and recurrence of South Sudan's internal conflicts. Moreover, in the attempt to produce a thorough and future-oriented investigation, the analysis is chronologically conducted by observing a timespan comprised between 2011 and 2035. Thus, the research question guiding the analysis is structured as follows: *"How do demographic change and Youth Bulge influence the competition for natural resources in South Sudan in the period 2011-2035, and which correlation can be observed with the enhancement of the country's internal conflicts?"*. The study adopts a multidisciplinary methodology, integrating quantitative indicators with qualitative assessments, case studies, and stability indexes, in order to produce a thorough and comprehensive research on the matter. The findings suggest that both demographic growth and a conspicuous Youth Bulge might cause an increase of pressures on a scenario of scarce natural resources, and that the consequent competition is often intertwined with conflictual dynamics. Nevertheless, such relationships are not unrelated to other mechanisms, relative to governance capacity, institutional absence and capability, and interferences by external actors. The analysis of future outlooks and projections until 2035 indicate the necessity for drastic policy interventions and improvements, in order to prevent the reinforcement of conflictual dynamics and promote a desirable future of long-lasting and stable peace for South Sudan, a scenario for which the civilian population has been yearning for decades.

INTRODUCTION

In the everchanging contemporary geopolitical scenario, continuously re-shaped by tensions, conflicts, wars, and changes of power, keeping track of the nearest challenges is a matter of the utmost importance. It is not an easy task to navigate the intricated network of delicate balance between superpowers, regions, and spheres of influence, as much as trying to grasp which phenomena and patterns the global situation is enduring, and how this peculiar situation will be evolving in the near future. Within this extremely complicated framework, an often-overlooked area of the world can be identified in the Horn of Africa, which nevertheless incarnates a potentially pivotal region for geopolitical, economic, and social reasons. A large number of states within the aforementioned region, in fact, is nowadays impacted by some of the most urgent contemporary issues, such as quickly developing population change, Youth Bulges, a constant and pressing fight for the availability, control, and distribution of scarce natural resources, and everlasting intestine conflicts, systematically ignored or misinterpreted by the international community, with global actors which tends to preserve their own economic interests in any conflictual situation.

Even since the 1990s, many scholars and studies have identified in Africa a region of peculiar interest from a demographic standpoint, given that the continent is expected to more than quadruple its population by the end of the twenty-first century¹. In such a delicate and rapidly growing scenario, an eye of special interest relative to the collateral effects of population growth has been attributed to the competition for the availability of natural resources, especially water and oil, which could be significantly affected by major demographic developments. As a matter of fact, a large part of the African continent lies in a zone where at least part of the year is arid and where recurrent droughts severely disturb agricultural production; the limping disposal of natural resources has not changed over the decades, and even to this day the Horn of Africa is identified as the region facing the highest level of water stress worldwide². Alongside this appalling statistic, the countries comprised within the aforementioned area represent some of the most interested by continuous and devastating internal conflicts, often intertwining with patterns relative to demographic change and competition for the control over natural resources. In fact, the combination of these factors may result in an overwhelming present and future framework for some countries of the region, especially the ones which do not display a solid and standing political, social, and economic structure.

¹ Falkenmark, M. (1990). *Rapid Population Growth and Water Scarcity: The Predicament of Tomorrow's Africa*. Population and Development Review, Vol. 16.

² Kuzma, S., Saccoccia, L. (2023). *25 Countries, Housing One-Quarter of the Population, Face Extremely High-Water Stress*. World Resources Institute.

Because of these reasons, this work will try to shed a light on the region of the Horn of Africa by observing one of its most interesting countries: South Sudan. The goal of the research will be to explore the extent to which causal dynamics and correlations can be observed between three variables, namely demographic change (expressed through the measures of population growth³ and Youth Bulge), the constant and incessant competition for natural resources (expressed by the fight over access, distribution, and control of water, oil, and livelihood-critical supplementary elements), and the exacerbation of internal conflicts. Naturally, this work will not assume any deterministic logic, since it rather seeks to identify and investigate potential causal effects, correlations, mechanisms of interaction, and levels of univocal or reciprocal impact between the aforementioned elements, even in light of other critical mediating factors.

In order to depict a more precise image of the matter, the analysis will only consider a timespan comprised between 2011, the year of birth of South Sudan as an independent state, and 2035, forecasting the following ten years in the future using notable data, indexes, and projections. The entire study will adopt a multidisciplinary comprehensive methodology, combining quantitative indicators with qualitative assessments, case studies, and stability indexes. Notwithstanding its relative recency, the interconnected analysis of demography and conflict does not represent an unexplored approach, and the addition of the variable relative to natural resources will reinforce the overall inferential chain. Many illustrious scholars have tried to infer connection mechanisms between demographic change and the outbreak of violent conflict⁴, to implement variables like median age, demographic growth, and differential group dynamics⁵, and even to consider fertility rates and life expectancy as drivers which could explain a society's proneness to violent confrontations⁶. Furthermore, this work's perspective will incorporate Brunborg and Urdal's intuition, according to which it is possible to intend demography as both a cause and a consequence of armed conflict⁷. As a matter of fact, the demographic effects of war and violence receive a high volume of mediatic attention, especially in relation to pivotal issues like casualties and forced displacement; on the other hand, demographic dynamics and processes can be intended as potential catalysts and causes of violence, especially if relative to population growth and competition over scarce resources. In

³ Lundquist, J.H. (2014). *Demography: The Study of Human Population, Fourth Edition*. Waveland Press, Chapter 3.

⁴ Goldstone J. (2002). *Population and Security: How Demographic Change Can Lead to Violent Conflict*. *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 56, No. 1. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24357881>.

⁵ Cincotta, R. (2017). *The Age-Structural Theory of State Behavior*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.327>.

⁶ Brooks, D., Brooks, S., Greenhill, B. and Haas, M. (2019). *The demographic transition theory of war: Why young societies are conflict-prone and old societies are the most peaceful*. *International Security*, 43(3), pp.53–95.

⁷ Brunborg, H., Urdal, H. (2005). *The Demography of Conflict and Violence: An Introduction*. *Journal of Peace Research*, 42(4), 371–374. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30042331>

recent times, even the age-sex structure of a country or society has been intended as an object of interest to explain the outbreak of violence, mainly through the facets of ethnic group dynamics and Youth Bulges, which will be thoroughly analyzed over the course of this work. Thus, it is possible and extremely interesting to depict a potential intersection between demography, societal development, and internal security, intended as three variables whose interplay may produce, especially on determinate societies, enormously impactful effects.

Delving into the specific outline of the work, its structure will follow a four-chapter repartition. In Chapter One, a brief but thorough overview of South Sudan's most relevant demographic facets will be developed, according to a multifaceted approach. In particular, a concise historical and socio-political profile of South Sudan (from 2011 to these days) will be firstly drawn, followed by the study of the country's most pressing demographic dynamics and patterns: population structure, demographic change, geographical distribution, the application of the predominant Youth Bulge theories to the country's context, and migration patterns. Finally, the chapter will be concluded with a compact analysis of future outlooks, alongside an exploration of potentially parallel scenarios influenced by the aforementioned destabilizing variables.

Subsequently, Chapter Two will deeply consider the general matter of natural resources in South Sudan. In particular, after a complete observation of the country's natural resources condition, their availability and relative distribution will be investigated, alongside the effects that population change and Youth Bulge might bestow upon both the work market and the comprehensive accessibility of natural resources. To strengthen the examination, Chapter Two will incorporate two case studies relative to resources-motivated conflict, still a very present plague in South Sudan's regions of Upper Nile, Unity, Central and Eastern Equatoria, Jonglei, and Warrap.

Furthermore, Chapter Three will focus its attention on the presence and development of internal conflicts which have taken place on South Sudanese soil, employing both scholars' views and literary production in the effort to determine which underlying causes are the most fitting to explain the country's ever-present proneness to conflict and violence. Particular attention will be devoted to case studies on the role of natural resources (mainly oil and water) in the development of the South Sudanese Civil War, on the dynamics of involvement and behavior of external actors in the sustainment of conflict scenarios, and on the possible responsibility of demographic processes in explaining the belligerent nature of the world's youngest nation. Being the core of this work's analysis, Chapter Three will try to shed a preliminary light on the potential interplay between

demography, natural resources, and the outbreak and continuance of violence and armed conflict, inferring causalities and correlations which could, subsequently, be tested.

Nearing the conclusion, Chapter Four will incorporate the use of global indexes and general measures to test the aforementioned potential causal effects and correlations between the considered variables, through a comprehensive analysis of South Sudan's current, past, and future situation in terms of conflict, stability, and peace. In particular, such observation will be conducted through the lenses of the Global Peace Index, the Fragile States Index, and the ACLED Conflict Index, in the attempt of giving a broad, multifaceted vision of the country's proneness to violence and conflict. The employment of indexes will solve the role of a substantial test to the hypothetical intersection between the three variables, in order to grasp concrete evidence of their potential interplay and reciprocal impact.

Lastly, a cumulative conclusion will summarize the results of the work, giving an answer to the driving proposed research question, before depicting the possible political and economic implications and policy suggestions for the country. Furthermore, the spanning analysis between 2011 and 2035 will be used to draw future perspectives on South Sudan's stability, observing ongoing patterns and trends and projecting a credible future scenario for the country.

CHAPTER ONE: DEMOGRAPHY IN SOUTH SUDAN (2011-2035)

1.1 HISTORY AND SOCIETY OF SOUTH SUDAN

In order to correctly introduce the numerous facets of such a complex country, it is first and foremost necessary to briefly retrace South Sudan's most important historical steps, bearing in mind that the majority of the pivotal events, especially those regarding civil wars and external tensions, will be analyzed more thoroughly in the following chapters. Moreover, given the different goals and aims of this research, the historical background will hereby be recalled in a very concise manner, with the sole objective to have a solid understanding of the interplay between ethnic groups, international actors, and groups of power which have been (and still are) present in the country.

South Sudan was originally geographically settled by the majority of its current ethnic groups between the 15th and the 19th centuries. After the invasion in the early 19th century by the hand of Egypt, under the Ottoman Empire, the southern Sudan was plundered for slaves. By the end of the century the entire Sudan was submitted under British Egyptian colonial rule; even though the northern part of the region accepted the British rule relatively quickly, there was greater resistance in the south. Because of this reason, the colonizers' efforts and resources in the north were directed toward modernization processes, whereas in the south they revolved around simply maintaining order, leading to a devastating dichotomy of development between north and south that was prolonged for several decades, and still explains some determinate power dynamics to this day.

After Sudan gained its independence in 1956, numerous governments which succeeded over the years found it difficult to obtain general acceptance from the country's diverse political constituencies, especially in the southern areas. As a consequence, an early conflict arose between those northern leaders who hoped to impose the vigorous extension of Islamic law and culture to all parts of the country and those who opposed this policy. The latter group included the majority of South Sudan's population, many of whom were already up in arms over fears that the south would be further marginalized by the northern-based government; those fears led to a lengthy civil war, started in 1955 and eventually ended by the Addis Ababa Agreement (1972), even though in the next decade widespread fighting resumed with the Second Civil War (1983–2005)⁸. In 2005, after more than twenty years of uninterrupted violence, the negotiations between the National Congress Party (NCP), expression of the Sudanese government, and the Sudan's People Liberation Movement (SPLM) were

⁸ See Chapter Three.

finally concluded, with the signing in Kenya of the Naivasha Agreement, commonly known as the Comprehensive Peace Agreement⁹. Such peaceful resolution marked the end of two decades of uninterrupted civil conflicts, alongside the culmination of peace negotiations facilitated by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), as well as the United Kingdom, Norway, the United States, and Italy¹⁰. In its fundamental aspects, the 250-page agreement created an extensive system for sharing power and oil revenue equitably between the north and the south of the region¹¹; it is a document of tremendous intricacy, a stark reminder that Sudan was torn by multiple intertwined conflicts. With the recognition of autonomy for South Sudan, the groundwork was set for the referendum on independence, which was eventually proposed in 2011¹². As predictable, the referendum was met with an astonishing majority of 99% of voters in favor to the secession from the north¹³, solidifying a decision accepted by Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir.

On July 9, 2011, after decades of violent and continuous conflict rooted in colonial history, identity politics, and competition for resources, South Sudan finally gained its independence from its motherland, Sudan, officially becoming the world's youngest nation. From a geographical standpoint, the newly born Republic of South Sudan was subdivided into ten states: Central Equatoria (Juba), Western Equatoria (Yambio), Eastern Equatoria (Torit), Jonglei (Bor), Unity (Bentiu), Upper Nile (Malakal), Lakes (Rumbek), Warrap (Kuacjok), Western Bahr el Ghazal (Wau), and Northern Bahr el Ghazal (Aweil)¹⁴. In spite of the historical achievement of independence, South Sudan's post-referendum period has been profoundly marred by internal power conflicts and struggles, sparking a new civil war in 2013¹⁵ that fractured the country along ethnic lines¹⁶, remarking the enormous difficulties that a divided and unstable country has to face. The South Sudanese population is in fact divided into more than sixty ethnic groups, sharing some similarities as well as enormous differences in customs, traditions, values, and religious beliefs, which will be explored in the following paragraphs. The extremely intricately interplay of ethnicity, weak or non-existent State institutions, and competition over natural resources (primarily oil, water, and cattle) has continued to challenge nation-building efforts in the region¹⁷, where both local and international actors have played

⁹ Ottaway, M., Hamzawy, A. (2011). *The Comprehensive Peace Agreement*. Carnegie Endowment For International Peace.

¹⁰ See Chapter Three.

¹¹ See Chapter Two.

¹² Johnson, D.H. (2016). *South Sudan: A New History for a New Nation*. Ohio University Press.

¹³ BBC (2011). *South Sudan referendum: 99% vote for independence*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12317927>.

¹⁴ Embassy of the Republic of South Sudan.

¹⁵ See Chapter 3.

¹⁶ De Waal, A. (2015). *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power*.

¹⁷ Young, J. (2012). *The Fate of Sudan: The Origins and Consequences of a Flawed Peace Process*. Zed Books.

significant roles in trying to mediate peace processes. Notwithstanding the numerous attempts, a model of sustainable peace remains completely elusive amid cycles of violence and displacement, and one of the goals of this analysis is to try and understand the reasons for these underlying difficulties, starting with a brief but exhaustive analysis of South Sudan's demographic framework, considering its evolution through the decades and the possibilities, opportunities, and challenges which will present in the near future.

1.2 POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHY IN SOUTH SUDAN

During the process of demographic analysis of a country or region, it is first and foremost pivotal to depict a correct and clear frame of its population structure. As a matter of fact, understanding the composition of a country's population is a key element in the analysis of its demographic processes, given that any dynamic invests a country in different manners, mostly due to its structural peculiarities. Thus, In order to correctly grasp the current situation South Sudan sits in, it is useful to analyze at first a photography of the general data regarding the country's demography. As a matter of fact, through a comprehensive observation of South Sudan's demographic condition, it is possible to draw patterns, trends, and potential outlooks, useful in determining which demographic processes the country is enduring and will face in the near future.

1.2.1 Overview of South Sudan's Population

As for 2025, the population of South Sudan is set at 12.188.788 inhabitants, ranking the country as number 81 in the global list by population. The median age in the country is extremely low, set at 18,7 years, while the fertility rate is exceptionally high, scoring 3,71 as the mean number of sons that a South Sudanese woman gives birth to in her lifespan. Furthermore, the urban population is set at 3.378.254, and it accounts for 27,7% of the population total, suggesting the presence of a predominantly rural citizenry, characterized by limited or unevenly distributed urban infrastructure and services. Moreover, such a low percentage might indicate economic activities centered around agriculture, with consequently high dependency ratios and the existence of challenges related to rural poverty, access to services, and internal migration to cities or inhabited centers. From a life quality standpoint, the mean life expectancy at birth of South Sudan is 57,9 years, considering both the male and female population, while the current infant mortality rate is set at 62,7 infant deaths per 1.000 live births. Finally, the ratio of deaths under five years of age is 97,4, an astonishingly elevated value.

The South Sudanese population, as anticipated, can be divided into more than sixty different ethnic groups, each one with its peculiar features of language, customs, and history. The most diffused ones are the Dinka (Jieng) and the Nuer (Naath), which comprehensively account for more than half of the South Sudanese population. Moreover, other considerable ethnic groups are the Shilluk (Chollo), Azande, Bari, Kakwa, Kuku, Murle, Mandari, Didinga, Ndongo, Bviri, Lndi, Anuak, Bongo, Lango, Dungotona, Acholi, Baka, and Fertit¹⁸. The majority of the ethnic groups in South Sudan are of African heritage, and they practice either Christianity or syncretism of Christian and Traditional African religion. There is a significant minority, mostly tribes of Arab heritage, who practice Islam. Crossing the data on religion, it is observable that most tribes of African heritage have at least one clan that has embraced Islam, while some clans of tribes of Arab heritage have embraced Christianity.

Temporarily leaving aside the chronological progress regarding population age and migration, which will be thoroughly analyzed in the following paragraphs, a simple but effective immediate comparison of the data in the considered timespan (from 2011 to 2035) could help in the evaluation of how South Sudan is evolving from a demographic standpoint, as well as in the production of outlooks and previsions regarding the destiny of the country. As a matter of fact, the analysis of population changes and demographic indicators is extremely revealing in the observation of a young, sub-Saharan country, highly exposed to volatile change, armed conflicts, and the fight for natural resources. Finally, the data analysis will be corroborated by visual cues and graphs, useful to immediately identify patterns or trends.

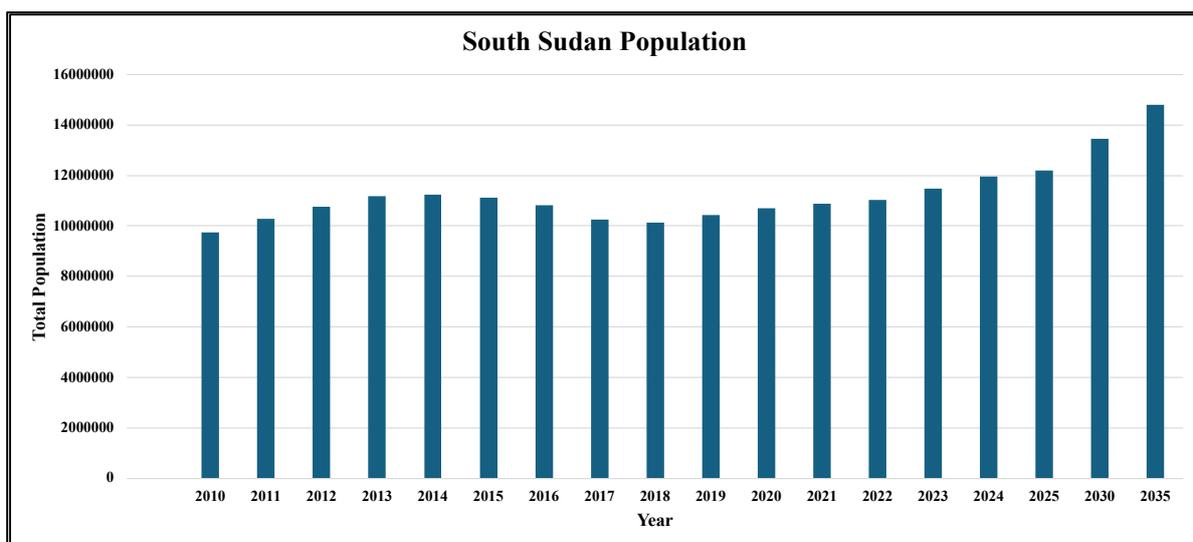


Figure 1.1 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. Worldometer 2025)

¹⁸ Bortoluzzi Garcia, L. (2020). *South Sudan Country Profile*. SFASID.

Starting from a retroactive analysis, it is possible to observe the evolution of South Sudanese demography from 2011 to this day, in order to grasp and understand the presence of patterns, trends, correlations and possible grounds for inference¹⁹. Starting from the simplest data on the mere population of South Sudan, it is evident that, from 2010 to this day, the country has encountered a steady increase in its total number of inhabitants, which shifted from less than 9.800.000 in 2010 to the aforementioned contemporary value. In general, the yearly population increase was set at almost 2% in the 2010-2019 timeframe, while it encountered its only decrease in 2020 (-0,75%), obviously due to the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. Starting from 2022, nevertheless, the rise in the total population of the country skyrocketed, registering an increase of more than 4% both in 2023 and 2024, while the latest yearly passage showcased a slight decrease, with a 2,05% augmentation in 2025. Over the same time span, the median age remained steady, even if a slight rise is observable in the latest two years, since in 2023 it eventually reached the threshold of 18 years of age.

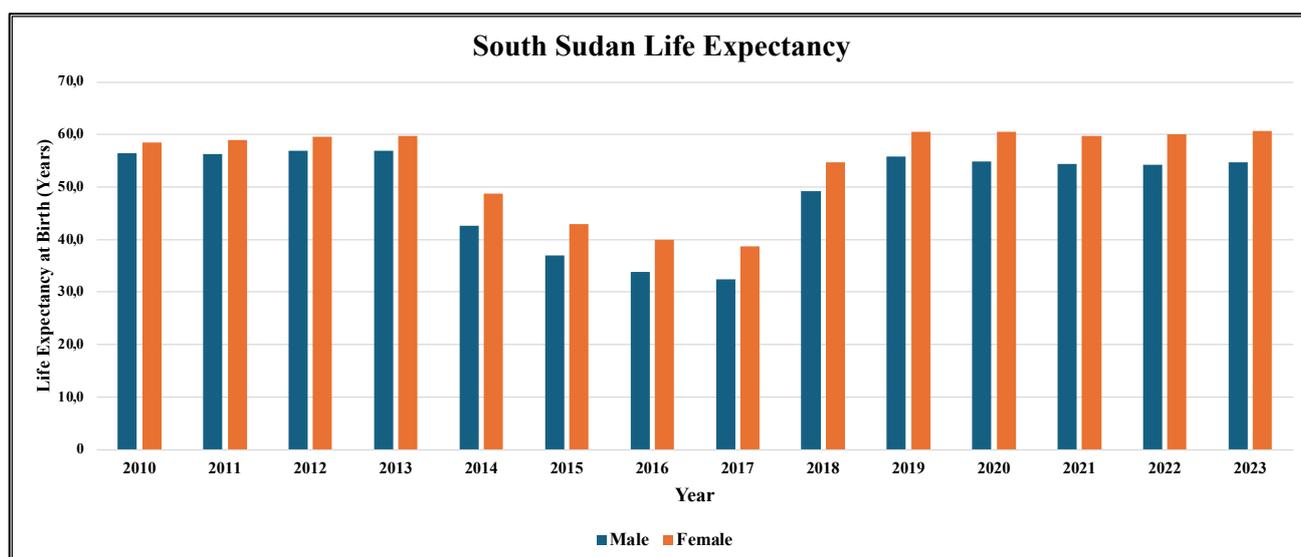


Figure 1.2 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. Worldometer 2025)

From the standpoint of fertility, it is important to note that the most significant drop in fertility rates occurred before the timeframe considered in this analysis; that said, a general depreciation of the fertility rate value can be seen on a yearly basis, even though the speed of such diminution is reducing in a constant manner. Furthermore, no significant remark can be done from the point of view of the urban population, both from a numerical and percentage standpoint, even if the country's density is encountering a steady but almost insignificant rise. If we take into observation the matter of life expectancy²⁰, it is extremely curious to state the enormous reduction which occurred from 2010

¹⁹ See Figure 1.1.

²⁰ See Figure 1.2.

to 2015, when the comprehensive median age dropped of almost 20 years, with a slight difference between men and women, since the former took a more significant diminishment. The reasons for such variation are to be found in the extremely delicate scenario which South Sudan found itself after its independence in 2011. In fact, the country quickly descended in a situation of civil war in 2013²¹, which quickly took on ethnic dimensions and led to massive displacement and violence. The main impact involved destruction of healthcare infrastructure, disruption of vaccination campaigns, widespread sexual violence, and collapse of basic services, which eventually led to sharp increases in mortality rates and in a subsequent drop in life expectancy²². By 2015, over 60% of healthcare facilities in conflict zones were either non-functional or had been destroyed, and many international NGOs were forced to evacuate staff due to insecurity. In the Upper Nile and Unity states, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported the looting and destruction of hospitals, leading to preventable deaths from malaria, diarrhea, and respiratory infections²³. Moreover, armed conflict disrupted agricultural cycles, markets, and humanitarian access; in a couple of years, nearly 4,6 million people were food insecure, and parts of Unity State experienced famine-like conditions. Finally, over two million people were displaced internally or became refugees after the conflict. Displacement camps experienced unsanitary conditions and overcrowding, leading to frequent outbreaks of cholera, measles, and malaria, all contributing to the aggravation of the situation and explaining the cut in life expectancy. Nevertheless, the numbers turned back to an acceptable situation in 2020, when they assumed the physiognomy they have to this day.

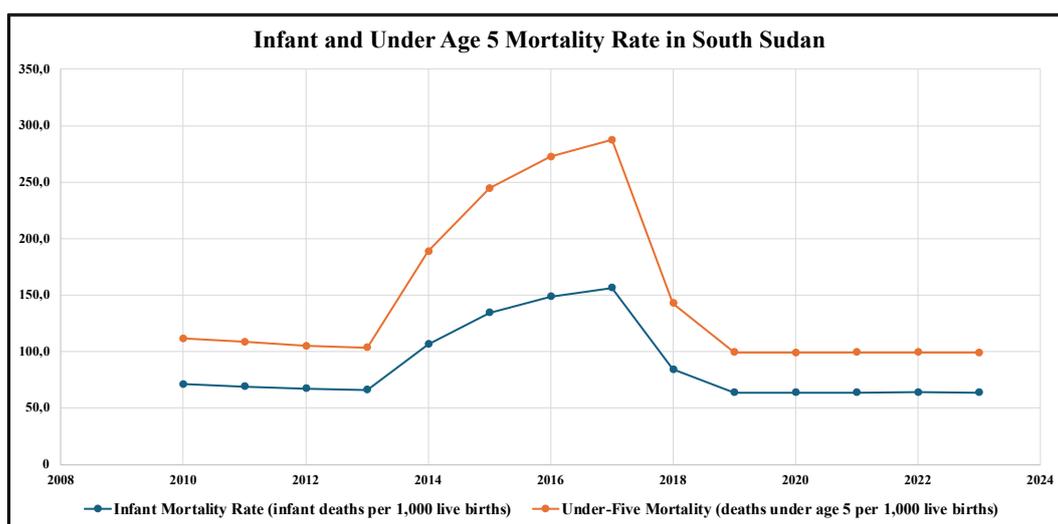


Figure 1.3 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. *Worldometer* 2025)

²¹ See Chapter Three.

²² De Waal, A. (2014). When kleptocracy becomes insolvent: Brute causes of the civil war in South Sudan. *African Affairs*, 113(452), 347–369.

²³ Checchi, F., Testa, F., Warsame, A., Quach, L., Burns, R. (2018). *Estimates of crisis-attributable mortality in South Sudan, December 2013–April 2018: A statistical analysis*. London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

The last factor deserving an analysis from a retroactive standpoint refers to infant mortality rates and mortality under the age of five in South Sudan²⁴, which naturally showcases a spike in the immediate years following the Civil War, for the same reasons explaining the drop in life expectancy. Nevertheless, the values not only returned to normality in 2020, but they even attested to the historical lowest of the country and are still facing a slight yearly reduction.

1.2.2 Future Outlooks and Potential Developments

Moving forward in the analysis of the main demographic indicators, the recent processes and phenomena South Sudan is enduring as a country allow scholars and institutes to try and define outlooks and forecasts for the country's near and far future. In the present analysis, our goal is circumscribed to ten years in the future, meaning that only projections for up to the year 2035 will be considered. Naturally, it is pivotal to consider that any possible forecast is limited to statistical models and previsions regarding South Sudan's fertility and mortality, considering the general trends which can be observed in the country. Thus, any potential digression for the mentioned results shall not be ruled out, given that any demographic outlook could be majorly influenced by both external and internal processes, such as the ones which will be treated in the following chapters. As a matter of fact, both the evolution of South Sudan's availability of natural resources and the evolution of the conflictual scenarios that involve the country are to be considered as impactful elements even in relation to the demographic evolution of South Sudan.

The first element worthy of consideration is the projected rise in the country's total population numbers, set to near a total of 13.500.000 in 2030 and even to almost reach a total of 15.000.000 inhabitants in 2035²⁵. Such extraordinary demographic results could be interpreted as the natural consequence of several factors, such as an elevated fertility rate, an extremely young population, the hypothetical gradual return of refugees and internally displaced people in the country, a slow process of urbanization and transition, and a generally weak implementation of population control policies. Obviously, some of these mechanisms could be deeply hindered by the evolution of conflictual situations in South Sudan, as well as by the development of the issues related to availability and distribution of natural resources in the country. In fact, as will be considered in further paragraphs, the condition of refugees and displaced people in South Sudan is still far from being solved due to the continuance of external and internal belligerence, and it could potentially affect the expected

²⁴ See Figure 1.3.

²⁵ See Figure 1.1.

effects on population change, Notwithstanding the facets of population age, Youth Bulge, and migration, which will be thoroughly analyzed in the following paragraph, it is important to briefly state the reasons and parameters which will have a significant impact on the South Sudanese population numbers.

As already mentioned, even though its values are expected to endure a slow but steady reduction in the following decades, South Sudan still presents one of the highest fertility rates in the whole world. The main reasons for such record rely on the extremely limited access to contraception; family planning uptake in South Sudan remains immensely low, with a contraceptive prevalence rate of only 6% for all methods. The essential medicines supply and distribution system in the country is greatly affected by an inefficient push system and a very weak national logistics management and information mechanism, with gaps in inventory management including forecasting, distribution, partner management of supplies, and reporting²⁶. Nevertheless, the presence of some ongoing projects promoted by NGOs and international organizations which aim at increasing the modern contraceptive prevalence from 6% to 15% by 2030 represents a reason for hope. With regards to the urbanization processes, South Sudan is set to remain a mainly rural country, with low levels of industrialization; according to certain interpretations of the Demographic Transition Model²⁷, countries experiencing a slower transition into urban-industrial societies tend to experience slower fertility decline, prolonging population growth. In fact, South Sudan could currently be placed within the so-called Stage 2 or Early Stage 3 of such model, in which mortality rates drop due to a plethora of conditions, but fertility remains high, eventually leading to rapid population growth, as will be explained in the following paragraph.

In summation, this first brief analysis tried to shed a light on the chronological evolution of South Sudan's demography, highlighting a potentially exciting situation of a thriving, mutating, and developing country, which could become progressively more stable and functional from a demographic standpoint, but only if some prerequisites are met, and external phenomena allow for a quiet and regular evolution to happen. In fact, as will be seen, South Sudan is enormously exposed to phenomena of conflict for natural resources and external interests, which could hinder processes of demographic development. In the following paragraph, one of the pivotal drivers of such evolution will be put under observation, trying to determine which role the element of population age and Youth Bulge plays in such a multifaceted and complex scenario.

²⁶ UNFPA South Sudan (2025).

²⁷ Dyson, T. (2010). Population and Development: The Demographic Transition. Zed Books.

1.3 POPULATION AGE AND YOUTH BULGE IN SOUTH SUDAN

After a brief but precise determination of a country's general structure, it is pivotal to delve more specifically on its peculiar elements, fundamental to understand how demographic processes impact, their evolution, and why a given country should pay further attention to more probable developments than others. In particular, scholars argue that the most prominent dimensions of a country's composition are undisputably age and sex; both variables solve a pivotal role in the evolution of a country's population and are vital to understand why and how certain processes invest countries more than others. Thus, in order to correctly understand why South Sudan is enduring determinate demographic processes, an observation of its age and sex structure is essential.

1.3.1 South Sudan's Age Structure

As already mentioned in the previous paragraphs, one of the most interesting characteristics of the population of South Sudan is its age structure. In fact, the country has always showcased an incredibly low median age, which has only recently surpassed the threshold of 18 years; if we take this factor into account, intertwining such level with other demographic dynamics, some interesting conclusions could be drawn, which will be further utilized in correlation with the issues related to natural resources and conflict.

First of all, it is pivotal to understand that sex and age are two of the most important drivers in the study of a certain population. As a matter of fact, both factors strongly influence the demographic processes, especially when dealing with differences in mortality, fertility, and migration. In the analysis of a country's age structure, the population is usually divided into three cohorts: 0 to 14 years of age, 15 to 64 years of age (representing the working age) and 65+ years of age. Furthermore, the results in the observation of a country's age structure can be paired with the analysis of its sex ratio, meaning the comparison between men and women in a country's population. The results of an age-sex analysis for any country can be visually represented in a population pyramid, a graphic element which immediately showcases the age-sex structure of the country in analysis. In the case of South Sudan, which falls within those countries pertaining to the Less-Developed Regions (LDRs) of the world, it is rational to expect a younger population and a broader-based population pyramid, due to the high value of fertility which usually characterizes such countries²⁸. Thus, if we

²⁸ Lundquist, J.H. (2014). Demography: The Study of Human Population, Fourth Edition. Waveland Press, Chapter 4.

observe the latest population pyramid produced for South Sudan²⁹, the results should not surprise; the pyramid is evidently broader based, meaning that the greatest majority of the population is under 24 years of age. Moreover, there seems to be no difference in the sex structure of the country, since the sex ratio demonstrates a standing equilibrium between the male and female population.

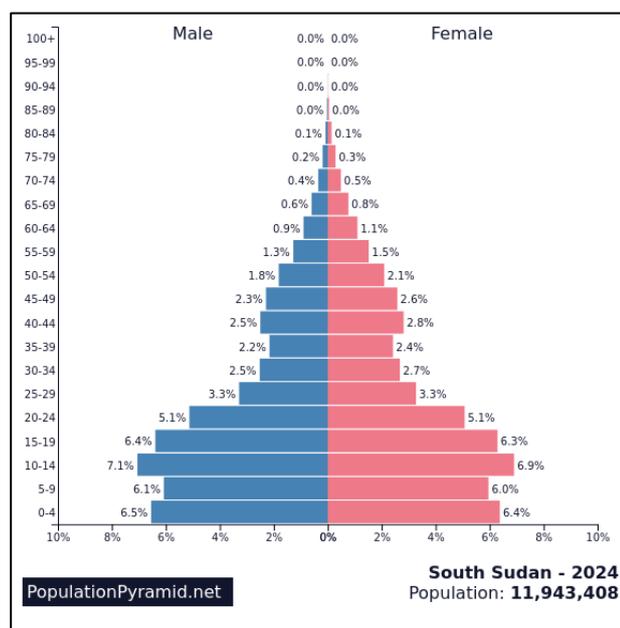


Figure 1.4 (Population Pyramid of South Sudan)

If we observe the chronological evolution of South Sudan’s population pyramid in the time span considered in this work (2011-2035), it is evident that the country is enduring a pivotal shift, which will be explained shortly after. Thanks to the retrieved data³⁰, the years between 2011 and 2025 showcase a general growth in the age structure of South Sudan’s population. Leaving aside the category of newborns (0 to 4 years of age), the majority of the citizens passed from the 5-9 age cohort (from 2011 to 2021), all the way to the current one, meaning the age between 10 and 14 years (2021-2025). Furthermore, if we consider the projections and future outlooks of the same values, the most diffused age cohort will become 15-19 in the next two years, before settling to the 20-24 one in 2031, where it is expected to sit until 2035. This data must be interpreted bearing in mind that the country is expected to maintain a high fertility rate, which should ensure a large number of newborns every year, but, as already said, the possibility of worse scenarios, driven by ongoing conflicts and the fight for natural resources, persists. In summation, South Sudan is experiencing a constant increase in its young population size, which eventually leads us to the definition of two of the most relevant

²⁹ See Figure 1.4.

³⁰ <https://www.populationpyramid.net/south-sudan/2010/> onwards.

demographic elements related to the age structure of a country, namely the Youth Bulge and the Demographic Window of Opportunity.

1.3.2 Youth Bulge and Demographic Window of Opportunity in South Sudan

In general demographic terms, the expression “Youth Bulge” is utilized to define the increase in the size of a country’s young population, conventionally set at a situation in which at least 30% of the population belongs to the 15-29 age cohort. The Youth Bulge is a common phenomenon in many LDRs, and in particular, in the least developed ones. It is often caused by a stage of a country’s development in which infant mortality is reduced, while fertility rates remain simultaneously high; as a result, a large share of the population is comprised of children and young adults, paving the way for numerous interesting demographic developments³¹.

According to numerous studies, the Youth Bulge may represent a problem for a young country, since the combination of a consistent number of young people and a parallel restricted access to labor market may collide, resulting in a lack of employment for a substantial share of the population. Moreover, according to theories such as the Demographic Transition Theory of War³² or Richard Cincotta’s Age-Structural Theory of State Behavior³³, young people are usually at the origin of conflicts, protests, and civil war situations, given that about 80% of conflicts worldwide happen in presence of Youth Bulges. If we consider the case of South Sudan more carefully, the situation might be safer due to the fact that, as mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the level of urbanization and its rate are not persistent in the country. In cases of Youth Bulge countries that also present a rapid rate of urbanization, in fact, young people tend to move from the countryside to the cities, which nevertheless are not prepared to accept substantial influxes of individuals from an infrastructural standpoint, and cannot offer an acceptable level of job opportunities. As a consequence, job seekers grow their expectations in an environment characterized by stress and lack of resources, which can result in the outbreak of protests, tensions, and even armed conflict.

The second concept which will be analyzed and applied to the case of South Sudan in this paragraph is the Demographic Window of Opportunity, linked with the element of the Demographic Dividend. In general terms, during the demographic transition, it is possible to identify a moment of

³¹ Lin, J.Y. (2012). Youth Bulge: A Demographic Dividend or a Demographic Bomb in Developing Countries? Let’s Talk Development.

³² Brooks, D.J., Brooks, S.G., Greenhill, B.D., Haas, M.L. (2019). The Demographic Transition Theory of War: Why Young Societies Are Conflict Prone and Old Societies Are the Most Peaceful Unavailable. MIT Press Direct.

³³ Cincotta, R. (2017). *The Age-Structural Theory of State Behavior*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia.

passage between a young population and a more mature (and possibly more developed) one, a temporary period of demographic growth defined by the specific moment in which death rates and, in a second moment, birth rates begin to fall. As a result, an increase in the total number of the population is induced by the high survival rate of those already born and a dynamic birth rate that continues to provide a persistent number of new births. Although initially the presence of large numbers of children and newborns requires resources that detract from other investments, over time the inertial effect of demography takes over, and those children move up the demographic pyramid, reaching an age at which they can begin to work and save money and resources. When the productive segment of the population expands, the potential for economic growth in a country enlarges. This entire process is commonly referred to as the Demographic Window of Opportunity³⁴, and it has been revealed as a fundamental condition, if supported by adequate policy making, for the development of countries. During the Window, which usually lasts 30 years, the active population (identified with those citizens in working age) rises to a value nearing 65% of the total population; if a population manages to obtain a large labour force with few dependent children, economic growth starts to accelerate, and the country grasps the Demographic Dividend. Naturally, the Demographic Window of Opportunity provides a series of benefits, including a larger workforce, more savings, and the improvement of human capital, but it is only achievable if a series of prerequisites are met, as will be studied in the following paragraphs.

In a more precise definition, the Demographic Dividend may be identified as the accelerated economic growth that can result from changes to a country's age structure as it shifts from high birth and death rates to low birth and death rates³⁵. In fact, when a country's total fertility rate drops, the average family size declines; in economic terms, this deflates the number of children in relation to the working-age population, freeing up personal and societal savings that support economic growth. In human terms it means that parents, families, communities, and governments can devote proportionately more resources to educating and nurturing each child; it also means that families can invest more in their small businesses. For it to be achieved, the Demographic Dividend has some pre-conditions, mainly identified in the levels of health (correct management of diseases and fertility), education (capability to provide skills and form workers), economics (openness to create jobs), and governance (capacity to maintain an environment characterized by sound governance principles).

³⁴ Crombach, L., Smits, J. (2022). *The Demographic Window of Opportunity and Economic Growth at Sub-National Level in 91 Developing Countries*. Springer Nature.

³⁵ Bloom, D., Canning, D., Sevilla, J. (2003). *The Demographic Dividend: A New Perspective on the Economic Consequences of Population Change*. Rand Corporation.

Notwithstanding the logic and linear theoretical functioning of the Demographic Window of Opportunity, it is pivotal to observe that, in order for it to be correctly exploited, some preconditions are essential. For the majority of the African countries encountering their Demographic Window of Opportunity, the main issue relates to the development of their young population, which we have already identified as the catalyst for a successful demographic transition. In order to correctly understand the logic behind the mechanism, it is pivotal to introduce the concept of dependency ratio, otherwise known as total or youth dependency ratio. The dependency ratio may be defined as the average number of economically dependent population per 100 economically productive population, for a given country, territory, or geographic area, at a specific point in time³⁶. In demographic terms, the economically dependent population is defined as the sum of the population under 15 years of age plus the population 65 years of age and over, while the economically productive population is defined as the population between 15 and 64 years of age. This demographic indicator, thus, gives insight into the number of people of non-working age, compared with the number of those of working age for a specific country, in a certain time period; the underlying logic of this measure regards the comparison between the sector of the population considered too young or too old to be fully economically productive and the rest of the population of working ages. The concept of dependency is, of course, culturally specific and may change over time; in many societies children begin working for wages younger than age 15, while other countries may have labor protection laws prohibiting child employment.

In any country's path to the Demographic Window of Opportunity, the dependency ratio plays a pivotal role, since youth dependency might represent an irreparable obstacle to a correct achievement of the Demographic Dividend and the associated economic spur. In fact, youth dependency problems arise in cases in which the dependency ratio remains too elevated to ignite an economic development³⁷. In countries with high fertility rates, the number of dependents logically increases, due to the number of newborns that need to be nurtured before becoming part of the productive workforce. In the Demographic Window of Opportunity pattern, as previously seen, fertility starts to decrease, and economies may profit from a temporary economic boost as these young dependents become adults, enter the productive labor force, and are replaced by smaller numbers of dependents in coming generations. On the other hand, in several cases of less-developed countries, the rapid natural increase means that economically dependent segments of the population remain large relative to the economically productive ones. In addition, rapid population growth makes it difficult

³⁶ World Health Organization.

³⁷ Lundquist, J.H. (2014). *Demography: The Study of Human Population*, Fourth Edition. Waveland Press, Chapter 4.

for governments to supply growing workforces with capital, or the means for production. Consequently, in order for the Demographic Window of Opportunity to be correctly exploited, the dependency ratio must remain relatively low; if the opposite scenario occurs, many ramifications of issues of youth dependency may arise. Youth dependency is by itself simply a structural population characteristic, but it is also seen as a source of social problems, since it can be a drain on per-capita wealth. The larger the cohorts that are too young to work in comparison with the cohorts that are of working age, the greater the number of consumers relative to producers. Even if in many African countries children start to contribute to their family's economic performance at an extremely young age, issues relative to a younger population range from social and health concerns (sexually transmitted diseases, birth-related deaths) to crime rates, affecting a country's economic performance.

In conclusion of this general parenthesis, while many developing countries are still quite young, they are undergoing fertility transitions that pave the way for the achievement of the Demographic Dividend. This early phase of transition from a young to an older population can result in a prolonged period of productivity and an opportunity for greater investment in children, leading to enhanced economic and social well-being. Many African countries, as will be observed, are demographically poised to take advantage of this transition process, with large proportions of youth entering adult working ages by 2020–2030, but only if some parameters are taken care of. To make the most of this age transition period, countries must be in a position to implement social policies to support the transition to adulthood: important infrastructure must be anticipated and put into place for youth, such as comprehensive child health programs, job-skills training, and educational policies, or the potential economic miracle represented by the Demographic Dividend could suddenly turn into a plethora of youth dependency problems, which can jeopardize a developing country's present and future situation.

If we apply these concepts to the concrete situation of South Sudan, it seems that some of the indicators point to a relatively far scenario of opening of the Demographic Window of Opportunity. As a matter of fact, South Sudan appears to be placed in a position to enter the Window, even though it is not yet classifiable as a country already experiencing it³⁸. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, South Sudan is experiencing a drop in mortality rates, but the fertility rates remain extremely high, notwithstanding their slow diminishment. Furthermore, even though the chronological evolution of the population pyramids showcases a slow but steady growth in the population age, the dependency

³⁸Onyekwere, S.C. (2022). *Demographic Dividend in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA): A Far-Fetched Dream?* Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Innovation, Vol. 2.

ratio in the country is still significant, with a large portion of dependents, mostly children, compared to the working-age population³⁹.

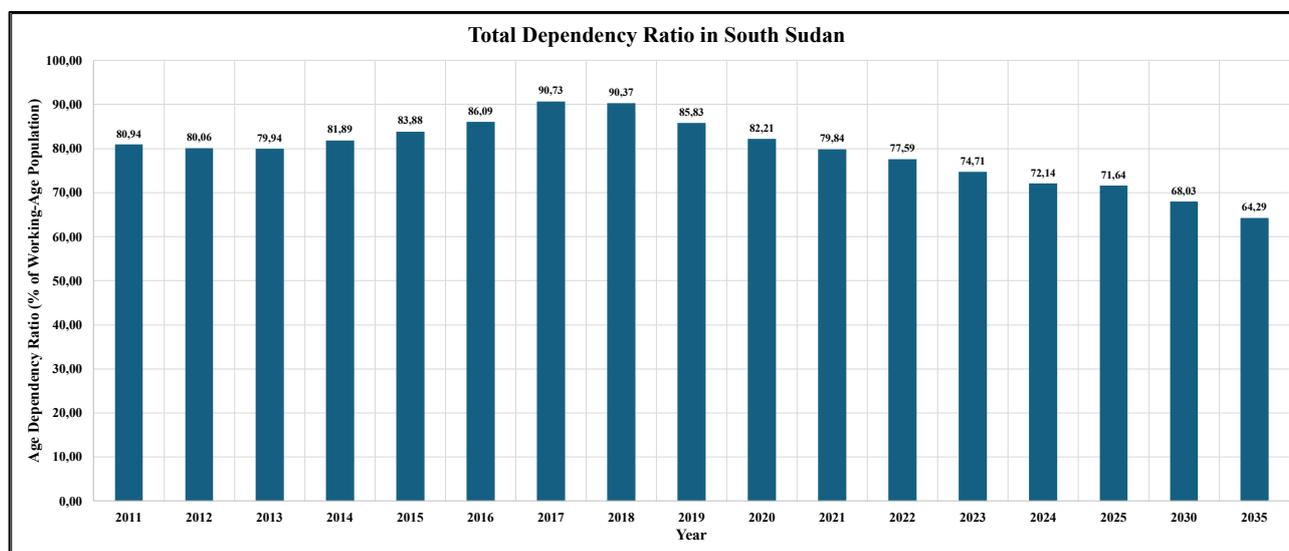


Figure 1.5 (UN Population Division; Age Dependency Ratio in South Sudan, 2011-2035)

In the quantitative observation of South Sudan’s data on dependency ratio within this work’s considered timespan, it is in fact immediately possible to highlight some significant results. Since the beginning of its life as an independent state, South Sudan has always showcased an astonishingly high age dependency ratio, which has mainly fluctuated around the threshold of 80%. Translating the data into a precise discourse, the numbers demonstrate that, for every 100 people of working age (15-64 years old), there are roughly 80 individuals considered dependent, meaning too young or too old to be assimilated to the working class. In general demographic terms, a general age dependency ratio above 70% is considered an elevated value, starting to produce effects relative to the burden on the workforce of a country. Thus, in the South Sudanese case, the implications of the dependency ratio on the workforce, the government, and the general demographic development of the country have been significant for the last fifteen years. As already mentioned, in fact, an elevated dependency ratio translates into an excessive burden upon the individuals of working age, given their need to work and produce more in order to support the unproductive section of the population, and on governmental spending, since the majority of resources should be allocated to healthcare, education, and pensions. In the peculiar context of South Sudan, as can be observed using the aforementioned population pyramids, the majority of unproductive individuals consist of too young citizens, rather than elders, given the particular composition of the country’s population and its enormously low median age.

³⁹ See Figure 1.5.

Observing the chronological evolution of the data, it is possible to detect a significant rise in the total dependency ratio in 2017 and 2018, which for the latter can be explained through the regressive value of infant and children mortality rates observed in the previous paragraphs⁴⁰. In fact, a decrease in infant mortality rates translates into the sustained survival of children, who will constitute a part of the unproductive population until they reach the conventional age of 15 years old. Notwithstanding the skyrocketing dependency ratio of more than 90% in these two years, South Sudan has been experiencing a slow but steady decline in this particular demographic feature ever since, compatible with the progressive base elevation seen in the population pyramids evolution. To this day, South Sudan's age dependency ratio is in fact set at its all-time low, slightly over the value of 72%; such number still represents a condition of excessive dependency, but the observable trends over the last seven years appears to suggest a continuously ameliorating situation relative to the matter. Finally, according to statistical projections, the total dependency ratio in South Sudan is expected to be lower than 70% in 2030 and even descend under 65% by 2035, if external destabilizing events allow a linear evolution of the factor. Such lowering might suggest that the most positive window for the country's demographic development, nearing the Demographic Window of Opportunity, could reside between shortly after the year 2035, in the most optimistic hypothesis.

As said, South Sudan's population appears to be starting to flourish from a demographic viewpoint, with its young population core entering the age of economic production, but the age dependency ratio remains too elevated to imagine a strong shift in the next few years. Thus, if the correct policies are implemented and external factors are limited, it could be possible for the country to exploit such condition and approach the Demographic Window of Opportunity, but such achievement appears to be realizable in a further future. Moreover, in order for the Demographic Dividend to be obtained, the country should correctly manage the evolution of its fertility rates, maintaining a relatively low value and, at the same time, reinforce the conditions for a correct functioning of its working-age population, with high employment rates, educational possibilities, and working opportunities. Naturally, it appears that the unstable condition of South Sudan, which will be better analyzed in the following chapters, does not represent a flourishing environment for economic development, even though the demographic conditions could become a reason for encouragement. In fact, South Sudan still needs to overcome significant challenges in the fields of state security, education, health, employment, and governance in order to make sure to be exploiting the demographic situation it is enduring. The most pressing issues regard the ongoing instability of

⁴⁰ See Figure 1.3.

the country, too often resulting in internal conflict which limits economic development, investment in human capital, and infrastructure, but also a weak education and health system which jeopardizes the development of a skilled and productive workforce (which, according to the aforementioned theories of Youth Bulge leading to conflict, could prevent the development of more contrasts). Furthermore, South Sudan needs to solve the lack of job opportunities for those citizens who are of working age, and most of all needs to sort the poor governance and institutional capacity that hinders the country's capability to implement effective policies.

In summation, South Sudan's destiny in relation to the Demographic Window of Opportunity sits in its own hands. If major policy and development challenges are addressed, reducing fertility through education and access to contraception, significant investments in education and skill development are made, and political stability is promoted alongside economic diversification, South Sudan could efficiently exploit the potentially advantageous situation it is enduring. On the other hand, if no strategic action is actuated, the risks for the country's development could become extremely relevant, turning its Youth Bulge into a source of instability rather than economic growth. If the latter scenario happens, more political instability will open space for conflict, misgovernment, corruption, and social fractures which could become irreparable. In the last paragraph of the present chapter, the final element of South Sudan's demographic framework will be addressed, trying to understand how the issue of migration impacts on the fluctuation of the country's demography.

1.4 MIGRATION IN SOUTH SUDAN: CAUSES, EFFECTS, AND TRENDS

When conducting a demographic observation, another pivotal element to consider is migration. As a matter of fact, migration is an extremely complex and multifaceted phenomenon which intertwines a series of implications and challenges in many fields, such as demography, security, economy, and politics. Notwithstanding the absence of a commonly shared definition, migration is defined by the International Organization for Migration as "the movement of people away from their usual place of residence to a new place of residence, either across an international border or within a State"⁴¹. Thus, the most important distinction that the definition itself marks is the one between international migration, which occurs when people cross State boundaries to live in another country for a minimum length of time, and internal migration, meaning when people move within the same country. Furthermore, rural-urban migration defines the process in which people move specifically from rural areas to urban locations within the same country.

⁴¹ International Organization for Migration. *Fundamentals of Migration*. <https://www.iom.int/fundamentals-migration>.

The reasons that push an individual to migrate can be extremely diversified. Over the course of time, many categories of migrants have been identified, so that guarantees, and different levels of national and international protection could be developed. Observing the current situation, there are six main recognized categories of migrants: asylum seekers (those who migrate seeking international protection⁴²), economic migrants (people who leave their country of origin purely for economic reasons that are not in any way related to the refugee definition, in order to seek material improvements in their livelihood⁴³), environmental migrants (people who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their life or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual home, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or across an international border⁴⁴), internally displaced people or IDPs (individuals who have been forced to flee their homes by conflict, violence, persecution or disasters who, unlike refugees, remain within their own country⁴⁵), and refugees (people who have fled their countries to escape conflict, violence, or persecution and have sought safety in another country⁴⁶). As already mentioned, these categories enjoy a different level of international protection and guarantee, with refugees being the most protected by international agreements and conventions.

Moreover, scholars have produced different theories and visions related to the motivations that convince an individual to migrate, even though there is naturally no commonly accepted answer. These empirical generalizations have given birth to migration theories that capture different elements of truth to explain both internal and international migration, which are nevertheless increasingly interconnected due to globalization. According to the Neoclassical Economics Theory, there is a direct correlation between labor and capital flows, since mass migration occurs from regions with labor surpluses to those with labor shortages and unsatisfied demands. On the other hand, the New Economics of Migration Theory challenges Neoclassical views, trying to explain migration as a family-based decision-making process driven by individual choices but also influenced by interests of a household⁴⁷.

⁴² UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency.

⁴³ European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs.

⁴⁴ European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs.

⁴⁵ UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency.

⁴⁶ UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency.

⁴⁷ De Haas, H. (2008). *Migration and Development: A Theoretical Perspective*. International Migration Institute, University of Oxford.

Within this analysis, the most relevant aspect of migration pertains to its effects from a demographic standpoint; for this reason, migration will be used exclusively as a reinforcement for South Sudan's demographic investigation, useful to depict the most precise image possible of the country, and not as one of the two defining pillars through which the correlation with natural resources and conflict will be conducted. Migration flows tend to favor population growth at the place of destinations at the expense of the place of origin, both directly (through the simple exchange of population) and indirectly (through age selectivity and differential fertility). In the long term, migration generally benefits the workforce at the place of destination, because selectivity will bring younger skilled laborers in demand to the destination's workforce while removing them from the population of origin, which can sometimes result in brain drain, an extremely common phenomenon in the African continent⁴⁸. However, remittances to less-developed countries are substantial and may provide families with some insurance against economic risks while providing much needed capital to less-developed economies. Finally, large-scale migrations can involve difficult adjustments and integration between migrant and original communities. In fact, much of the resistance to immigration seems the result of xenophobia and fears over the loss of dominance by majority cultural and political groups in the population of destination.

The migration issue is a question of the utmost importance in South Sudan. As already mentioned in previous paragraphs, the current number of net migrants⁴⁹ in the country is set at 6.145, but the yearly change in the time span between 2010 and 2035 needs to be carefully considered. According to the retrieved data⁵⁰, South Sudan has initially been a country of immigration from the year of its independence, but the 2013 civil war⁵¹ provided a massive shift in the migration patterns. Every year between 2014 and 2017 registered a negative net number of migrants, meaning that more people fled the country if compared to the ones entering it. In particular, 2017 endured the most significant drop, with a net number of migrants of more than -670.000. The reasons for such a massive displacement are obviously to be found in the emergency situation created by a prolonged status of civil war, compounded by food insecurity and climate change. Nevertheless, in 2018 the situation reversed, since the return of the originally fleeing South Sudanese people marked the first positive net number of migrants in four years. Notwithstanding a positive situation for the next years, in 2021 South Sudan endured another drop in the migration rate, with more than 150.000 people leaving the

⁴⁸ Ruffato, E. (2023). *Il Fenomeno del Brain Drain in Africa*; Geopolitica.info. <https://www.geopolitica.info/brain-drain-africa-oms/>.

⁴⁹ The difference between the number of immigrants and the number of emigrants within a country over a specific period of time.

⁵⁰ See Figure 1.6.

⁵¹ See Chapter Three.

country due to the devastating floods that damaged the Unity State and the Sudd wetlands. This major displacement naturally led to a massive flux of return migrants in 2023, where the registered net number of migrants surpassed the threshold of 455,000; these people mainly returned from their displacement in Sudan and in refugee camps, seeking for an amelioration of their life condition. In reality, the current situation depicts a sorrowful situation.

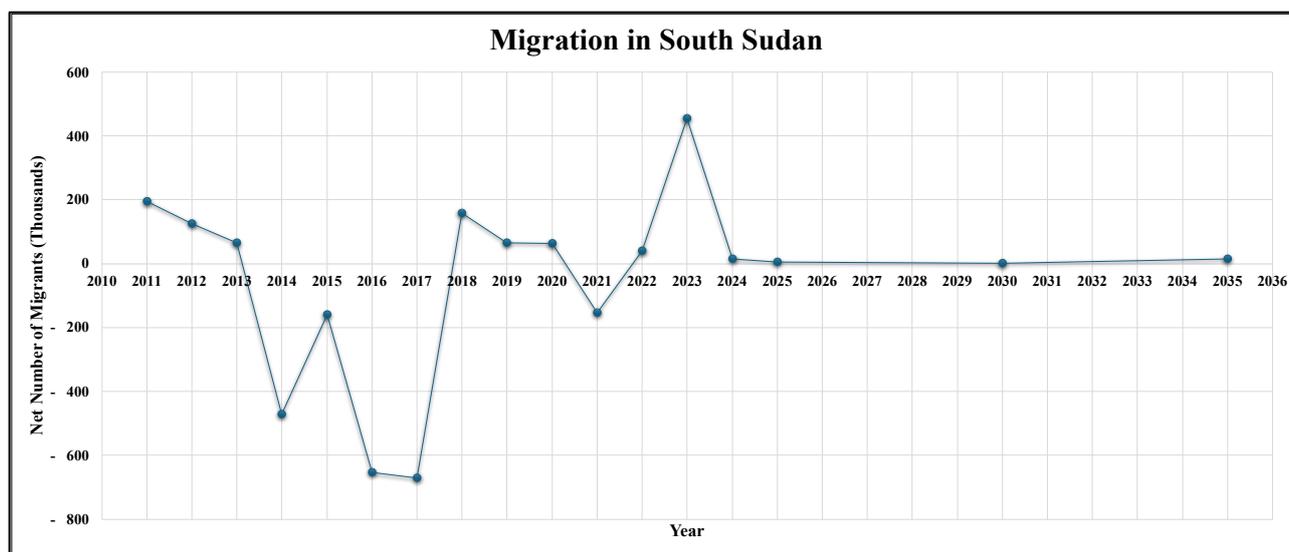


Figure 1.6 (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. Worldometer 2025)

If we observe the current situation, the South Sudanese one remains one of Africa’s most significant refugee crises, with more than two million refugees and asylum seekers in neighboring countries (mainly Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, and the Democratic Republic of Congo), and a further two million South Sudanese internally displaced within their own country because of conflict or natural disasters. The large return movements from the crisis in Sudan has strained a significantly overstretched humanitarian response, with significant logistical challenges related to the reintegration of returnees who have been forced to return prematurely⁵². Four consecutive years of flooding in South Sudan have destroyed homes and livelihoods, exacerbated food shortages and weakened the economy, and millions remain at risk. Notwithstanding such a complex situation, the future projections and outlooks for the country’s management of migration seem to forecast a stable situation, given that in 2030 and 2035 the net number of migrants is not expected to surpass the threshold of 15,000.

⁵² UNHCR Global Focus. *South Sudan situation*. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/south-sudan-situation#:~:text=2025%20situation%20overview,The%20South%20Sudan%20situation%20remains%20one%20of%20Africa's%20most%20significant,by%20conflict%20or%20natural%20disasters.>

1.5 POTENTIAL CRITICALITIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Notwithstanding the statistical and technical validity of the presented demographic projections and outlooks, it is important to anticipate the existence of several destabilizing factors which could, both in a short and long-term period, hinder South Sudan's expected demographic development, derailing the population's linear evolution and curtailing the country's chances to a potentially profitable future. As a matter of fact, this work will consider the interplay between demographic processes, availability of natural resources, and outbreak of armed conflict within South Sudan's framework using the latter as the dependent variable, but it is still fundamental to note how the influential process can be reversed, trying to determine how the fight for scarce resources and the evolution of violent confrontations in the country could affect the demographic dynamics the country is expected to endure.

Even though the following mechanisms will be further explained in the following paragraphs, understanding the impact that external factors could produce in the logical evolution of South Sudan's demographic landscape is a matter of the utmost importance. By learning from past conflictual and destabilizing situations, in fact, it is immediately possible to note that significant occurrences and events have already mutated the expected course of the country's population trajectory. The 2013 conflict⁵³, arguably the most violent and destructive discord of South Sudan's recent past, has generated an enormous impact on the projected growth of the country's population, displacing at least 2,3 million people outside the country as refugees and generally slowing South Sudan's rhythm by over 2%. Transposing the same pattern on the current situation of instability, which will be dissected in the following chapters, it is thus not impossible to expect that, if the current peace agreement does not hold (as recent developments seem to indicate), the demographic outlook of South Sudan could be drastically modified⁵⁴. As a matter of fact, a considerable section of the country's future population growth is to be attributed to the phenomenon of return migration; according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the majority of South Sudan's displaced people and refugees is expected to flow back into the country's borders around 2035, if adequate social services are provided. Such estimate is based on the already experienced return flows that followed the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which produced a notable boost in the country's demographic numbers⁵⁵. Thus, once again, return migration is projected to solve a pivotal role in replenishing South

⁵³ See Chapter Three.

⁵⁴ Mayai, A.T. (2020). *South Sudan's Demography – Looking to 2050*. Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) South Sudan.

⁵⁵ Alburez-Gutierrez, D., García, C. (2018). The UNHCR Demographic Projection Tool: estimating the future size and composition of forcibly displaced populations. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-ie/5ae9ee747.pdf>.

Sudan's population tissue, also due to the fact that the majority of externally displaced citizens are women and children, with 63% of South Sudanese refugees being under the age of 18⁵⁶. Consequently, the expected flows of return migrants are expected to modify the country's age-sex structure, enhancing the already consistent cohorts of young and dependent people, which will constitute the future workforce, but if the situation of armed conflict turns for the worst, the complexity of this pattern could endure a dramatic shift⁵⁷. If the present peace agreement does not hold and South Sudan once again falls into a spiral on conflict⁵⁸, the demographic effects that the country could endure might have a devastating impact. In fact, not only the awaited refugees return influx will be postponed, but the total number of refugees and displaced people could increase drastically, given the numbers that past conflicts have bestowed upon the country. Moreover, the population level should also be recalibrated in light of the casualties that a renewed conflictual situation would generate, jeopardizing the coveted demographic rise that South Sudan could experience if the statistical mechanism is hindered by violence. If we observe the country's recent past, the impact of the 2013 civil war on South Sudan has depicted exactly the hereby described scenarios, since the total population estimates for the following years had to be rebalanced, suffering from more than 400.000 deaths related to the conflict and more than two million refugees fleeing to neighboring countries. Thus, conflict remains a prime driver for the hindrance of demographic evolution, and South Sudan's history should provide a valuable lesson on the same matter for its near future.

Notwithstanding the predominant importance of conflict as a destabilizing element on South Sudan's demographic evolution, even the variable relative to natural resources must be considered as a potential disturbance for the aforementioned statistical progress of the country's population. South Sudan's peculiar condition of natural resources will be thoroughly analyzed in Chapter Two, but it is important to anticipate in this phase that, as for the majority of the Horn of Africa's regions, even the world's youngest state struggles with natural elements' availability and distribution, usually resulting in overlapping interests, unenforced policies, and general inequality and discomfort. The most pressing issue regarding natural resources in South Sudan refers to its everchanging climatic condition; climate change has demonstrated to have an astonishing impact on the country's environmental landscape, given South Sudan's wide proneness to extreme climatic events, such as floods and droughts. A more precise analysis⁵⁹ will showcase the number of devastating climatic

⁵⁶ UNHCR South Sudan.

⁵⁷ Ensor, M.O. (2014). Youth culture, refugee (re) integration, and diasporic identities in South Sudan. *Postcolonial Text*, 8(3 & 4).

⁵⁸ See Chapter Four.

⁵⁹ See Chapter Two.

events which have hammered the country since the start of its existence and still continue to produce significant demographic repercussions. As a matter of fact, aside from armed conflict and civil war, adverse environmental occurrences still represent one of the main reasons for displacement in South Sudan, especially in the most exposed states. Over the last decade, in fact, over one million people have been affected by floods and forcibly displaced⁶⁰, incrementing the fluctuation of the country's demographic data. Given the recurrence of these extreme events, impossible to rule out even in the future timespan considered in this analysis, a negative climatic season could hinder any demographic trajectory, recreating patterns of displacement and fleeing which would significantly impact South Sudan's population growth. Furthermore, the country's already teetering natural resources condition has lately been aggravated by its relative policies, which are often approximate, too broad, and most importantly not respected, due to a lack of capillary control and a functioning enforcing mechanism. This scenario of inaccuracy and lack of certainty reflects on the country's productive capacity, which showcases holes, differences between formal and informal manufacture, imprecise commercial data, and an overall loose economy. Once again, the interplay between the considered variables could result in a vicious cycle: if the peace agreement fails to resist, South Sudan's economy could return to recession⁶¹, deteriorating the already flawed political stability. In such scenario, without a stable economy, the vast majority of South Sudanese youth would be unable to find sustainable employment, meaning that more people will remain in poverty, leaving the country with a sizeable proportion of its growing number of young people restless and discontented. In turn, this aggravation could enhance the tensions within South Sudan, exacerbating contrast and igniting conflict, which would eventually produce the aforementioned negative demographic results.

Finally, the last destabilizing factor which could endanger South Sudan's future demographic performance refers to the country's health infrastructure, to this day considered unprepared to meet the demands or rapid population growth. Notwithstanding the current appalling conditions of the country's welfare services, the expected rise in the total number of inhabitants is set to produce further pressure on a system that already faces significant challenges. In fact, South Sudan's current healthcare policies must aim at improving child nutrition, reducing the maternal mortality rate, waterborne diseases, and malaria cases, as well as improving access to quality services in basic health facilities, and if the population grows as projected, the system is likely to be overwhelmed, and eventually collapse. Thus, if major investments are not realized even from a welfare standpoint, a

⁶⁰ World Food Program USA. South Sudan Hunger and Climate Crisis.

⁶¹ World Bank Group (2020). *South Sudan Economic Analysis Shows Growth Promise Amid Fragility*.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/04/02/south-sudan-economic-analysis-shows-growth-promise-amid-fragility>.

crumble of the entire healthcare infrastructure in South Sudan could occur at any moment in the future, with obvious tremendous repercussions on the country's demographic processes onwards. In fact, if the system collapses, the entire mechanism of ensuring the survival of the future productive force of the country would fall to pieces, resulting in the total incapability of managing any population evolution.

In summation, the demographic analysis of South Sudan showcases the features of an extremely complex country, profoundly characterized by ethnic differences, challenges, natural disasters, and internal conflict. Nevertheless, even though the critical points remain well established and potentially present, the demographic trends and patterns that South Sudan is enduring might depict a promising image, even if the benefits related to a demographic boost could only be achieved if the country manages to solve all the surrounding profiles of criticality. Just like many for other countries of the Horn of Africa, the future of South Sudan is unpredictable and volatile, but the numbers related to population change and the Demographic Window of Opportunity seem to give a glimmer of hope for a country that has been devastated since its birth. Obviously, this work only took in consideration a timeframe between 2011 and 2035, but the observed patterns clarify a constantly evolving situation, which must be looked at with extreme care, given that it could be easily destabilized by external processes, mainly related to issues relative to natural resources and South Sudan's proneness to conflict. In the following chapter, thus, the pivotal element of availability and distribution of natural resources in South Sudan will be thoroughly analyzed, starting to highlight some correlations with the demographic situation the country finds itself in, in order to possibly infer a level of interplay between the two variables.

CHAPTER TWO: NATURAL RESOURCES IN SOUTH SUDAN

2.1 NATURAL RESOURCES OVERLOOK AND ECONOMIC IMPACT

The second fundamental factor around which the present work revolves regards the matter of natural resources, an issue of extreme relevance in many areas of the African continent, useful to explain the potential advantages countries may gain from a large resource availability, but also the reasons for the outburst of internal conflicts, interference, and control by external actors.

Natural resources constitute the basic support systems for life on Earth. Hundreds of millions of people in both the urban and rural areas directly depend on natural resources for provision of crucial ecosystem services and livelihoods support. Water, soil, air, forests, and other biodiversity play a major role in the support of life systems, which are indispensable for human survival. In addition, minerals and fossil fuel deposits, if and when sustainably exploited, can solve a major role in human development in terms of income generation, job creation, and energy provision. In specific, the region of the Horn of Africa is naturally characterized by favorable soils and climate for agricultural production and human settlement, alongside a quite rich biodiversity. In addition, the area is endowed with large deposits of minerals like gold, diamond, titanium, gemstones and iron ore. Coal, gas and oil deposits, which represented the main drivers of industrialization in many developed countries, have recently been discovered in the region, and are expected to play a pivotal role in its development⁶². However, the potential exploitation of the available resources for the Horn of Africa's wellness is characterized by a plethora of problems and challenges. First and foremost, the region is formally categorized as a water stress region, with the majority of the land mass in Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Somalia and both South Sudan and Sudan being classified as either arid or semi-arid⁶³. Furthermore, despite the presence of major rivers in the area, the dependence on rain-fed agriculture is widespread; consequently, the unpredictable nature of rainfall in terms of patterns and levels (a problem mostly associated with climate change) has negatively affected the region's food security. Many times, the Horn of Africa has relied on food aid from the rest of the world, but overreliance on traditional subsistence farming methods, which leads to land degradation and underproduction, has only exacerbated food insecurity. Furthermore, although the Horn of Africa is endowed with mineral deposits, lack of technology and capital has left these resources profoundly unexploited, while in

⁶² Stiftung, H.B. (2013). Essay of the East and Horn of African Delegates: Roadmap to prosperity through sustainable Natural resources management in the East and Horn of Africa.

⁶³ Kuzma, S., Saccoccia, L. (2023). 25 Countries, Housing One-Quarter of the Population, Face Extremely High-Water Stress. World Resources Institute.

some cases governmental mining concessions were designed to give minimal or no benefits to the local populations. The aftermath of such a delicate scenario is characterized by animosity and conflict between peoples, governments, and mining companies, which in many cases leads to war, destruction of property and loss of lives and livelihoods. As a primary example, coal has been discovered in many countries of the Horn of Africa, but the region having had no past experience in this field and considering the so-called “oil curse”⁶⁴ that has stricken many African countries, governments need to find a way to handle mining of these resources and avoid the pitfalls that others have fallen into. A similar reasoning could be applied to the management of forests, which have always played a significant role as the source of biomass energy in the region, source of food for the hunting and gathering communities, and a habitat for the unique flora and fauna of the region. However, forests are currently being over-exploited for timber and charcoal production all around the Horn of Africa, while land use change for agriculture and development purposes has seen the proportion of forests in many countries in the region to fall.

2.1.1 South Sudan’s Natural Resources Economy

Shifting the attention to the particular situation of South Sudan, it is extremely useful to identify the main geographical, physical, and resources-related features of the country, in order to grasp the framework in which the present analysis takes place. As South Sudan emerges onto the global stage, a comprehensive understanding of its natural resources landscape becomes increasingly vital, serving as the foundation for informed decision-making and sustainable development initiatives in this dynamic and resource-rich nation. The physical geography of South Sudan showcases a rich tapestry of ecosystems, encompassing vast wetlands, floodplain grasslands, savannas, and montane forests. From a geographical standpoint, South Sudan lies immediately south of the Sahel and spans from the subtropical Northern Congolian forests in the southwest to the semiarid Sahelian savanna in the north. Almost the entirety of its land area falls within the White Nile Basin, comprised for the 20% of its total extension directly in South Sudan, with the vast Sudd wetland at its heart. The Sudd is the world’s second largest seasonal wetland; furthermore, most of the floodplain consists of a mosaic of grasslands and savannas, grading to denser woodlands in the higher lands along the Western and Southern boundaries. Given the low degree of industrialization in the country⁶⁵, a low human footprint allowed vast tracks of the South Sudanese habitat to remain in generally good condition, due to the reduced levels of population density. Although most of the land is potentially arable, only

⁶⁴ Ross, M.L. (2013). *The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations*. UCLA Political Science.

⁶⁵ See Chapter One.

around 5% is effectively used for cropping; however, pastoral and agropastoral livelihood systems are extensively practiced. Finally, the majority of the land in South Sudan remains de facto communal, held and managed collectively by communities or traditional authorities.

From an economic standpoint, related to the observable management and exploitation of natural resources, South Sudan appears to be mainly characterized by the vast proliferation of three predominant sectors: fisheries, forests, and wildlife tourism.

Fishing is key to the livelihoods of many South Sudanese citizens and makes a huge contribution to overall nutrition, aside from generating significant local government income in the states of Upper Nile, Jonglei, and Unity. South Sudan is estimated to have one of the most productive freshwater fisheries in the world⁶⁶, even though, as a predominantly tropical floodplain system, production is highly dependent on the extent of the annual flood pulse, and it cannot rely on any kind of organization and modern infrastructure. Thus, fisheries do represent one of the most valuable renewable resources in South Sudan⁶⁷, but the industry remains profoundly underexploited at the national level. If correctly managed, fish could become one of the largest non-oil exports of the country, but there seems to be little to no action in a sense that would boost the industry.

State	Population	Percentage of fishers	Number of fishers	Number of primary fishers	Fish catch by primary fishers (t)
Western Bahr el Ghazal	662897	6	39774	3977	5568
Northern Bahr el Ghazal	935156	7	6546	6546	9165
Western Equatorial	944431	9	84999	8500	11900
Unity	1123634	28	31462	31462	44047
Eastern Equatorial	1125346	2	22507	2251	3151
Lakes	1209754	24	29034	29034	40648
Warrap	1248033	12	149764	14976	20967
Upper Nile	1522253	35	532789	53279	74590
Central Equatorial	1545679	13	200938	20094	28131
Jonglei	2031778	30	60953	60953	85335
Total	12348961	19	2310723	231072	323501

Table 2.1 (World Bank 2024. Fishing in South Sudan)

Furthermore, in the forestry sector, data highlight that South Sudan showcases extensive forest land with exceptionally high ecosystem integrity and may still contain commercially valuable native species which neighboring countries have largely lost. Forest types and their characteristics differ from region to region, with the densest and best-stocked ones located in the western parts of the

⁶⁶ See Table 2.1

⁶⁷ The World Bank Group (2024). South Sudan Natural Resources Review.

country, particularly in the Northern Congolian forest-savanna mosaic, and in the East Sudanian savanna ecoregions. Forest products are pivotal to the sustainment of the rural populations, given that wood-based fuels provide for almost the entirety of the energy used in households; in this sense South Sudan appears to be an advantaged country, since it is endowed with a large number of well-productive forests⁶⁸, used for energy production and livelihood sustainment. Nevertheless, the lack of a well-functioning management system and general guarantees and protection make it extremely difficult to elevate such natural resource to the position it could occupy (according to data⁶⁹, a restored forest industry could generate a revenue close to \$1 million per 1.000 inhabitants, if short-term investments are made). A clear symptom of this lack of organization may be observed in the enormous discrepancies in trade volumes between the official and the observed data; the issue of illegal logging in South Sudan is quickly becoming a serious matter, due to the uncertainty and unclearness of the underlying legal framework.

Finally, in the wildlife sector, South Sudan retains vast and varied natural habitats with the potential to support world-class, nature-based tourism attractions, but the two most globally important wildlife landscapes, respectively the vast Sudd wetland and the Boma-Bandingilo-Jonglei landscape (which encompasses the world's largest wildlife migration), are only partly protected, and wildlife management is very limited throughout the country. In general, critical wildlife areas in South Sudan are covered by a level of protection that does not consider traditional land ownership or consultation, resulting in an extremely superficial guarantee, often not respected. Nevertheless, chronologically starting from the country's independence, management and conservation efforts have been overseen by the Ministry of Wildlife Conservation and Tourism (MWCT), alongside international conservation organizations, in order to correctly assess the main critical points and efficiently tackle the issues.

2.1.2 Legislative Framework and Resources Management Evolution

As observed in the aforementioned analysis, the most pressing issue related to all three aforementioned sectors may be easily identified in the lack of active and legally institutionalized natural resources management systems at the national level, which inevitably leaves a vacuum of openness to resources. The widespread presence of customary management systems not only forbids the correct economic exploitation and development of the natural resources industry, but it also enhances the risk of armed conflict and tensions between tribes and human groups, which will be

⁶⁸ Republic of South Sudan, Ministry of Environment and Forestry (MoEF).

⁶⁹ Observatory of Economic Complexity (2024). *South Sudan: Sawn Timber Exports*.

thoroughly analyzed in further paragraphs. As a result, high-value resources have been severely depleted, while other resources whose abundance currently outstrips the local demand are inefficiently exploited. As South Sudan tries to complete its transition from a largely tribal society to a modern state, the role of traditional authorities and the rights of individuals need to be formalized to provide for secure tenure and investment in natural resource management. As already said for the demographic aspect⁷⁰, South Sudan is on the verge of a huge development window of opportunity, but only the correct management of the enormous untapped potential of the country, even from a natural resources point of view, could lead to the realization of such scenarios.

If we observe the current legislative and governance framework, it is clear that the regulation regarding wildlife and natural resources is outdated, inefficient, and most importantly excessively vague. The Land of Act (2009)⁷¹ generally disciplines all kinds of land in the country, which can be registered by communities under their name, the name of a leader, the name of a clan, family, or community association. Once registered, individual community members may claim individual rights within the land area. Nevertheless, the lack of formal recognition of land and resource rights for the communities is extremely common, creating an issue which translates into challenges in establishing formal land tenure and completing land transactions. From 2009 onwards, only a few legislative projects have been promoted, but their application has not been homogeneous nor rigorous. In 2015, a 25-year investment framework named CAMP, involving more than 100 projects for South Sudan's crop, livestock, forestry, and fisheries subsectors, has been approved, but to this day it remains largely unimplemented. The same discourse applies for fisheries and forestry policies⁷², most of which do recognize the importance of sustainable management and community participation but are not backed by concrete legislature.

To conclude, even where policies are present, the critical and systematic weakness of South Sudan's government institutions makes it impossible to implement the current legislation, also due to the absence of the financial and operational resources necessary for the projects' completion. In fact, poor coordination between communities and government institutions at all levels results in fragmented resource management, especially if paired with a critical lack of private and individual capacity to manage resources and identify exploitable opportunities.

⁷⁰ See Chapter One.

⁷¹ Laws of Southern Sudan (2009). *The Land Act*.

⁷² Forest Policy (2015) and Forest Bill (2023).

2.1.3 The Mining and Extraction Industry

Another central and incredibly interesting sector of South Sudan's natural resources array regards the mining and extraction industry⁷³. In relations to its mineral wealth, the country showcases an interesting pattern; South Sudan might potentially have a very significant number of deposits of minerals and rare earth elements, such as petroleum, iron ore, copper, chromium ore, zinc, tungsten, silver, and diamonds, but the only mineral which is currently systematically mined is gold, predominantly present in the region of Eastern Equatoria. Notwithstanding its primary importance in relations to the industry, even the extraction and manufacturing of gold is far from being substantial, mainly due to the lack of regulatory frameworks and the approval of specific operations in such a delicate field, prone to the creation of conflicts.

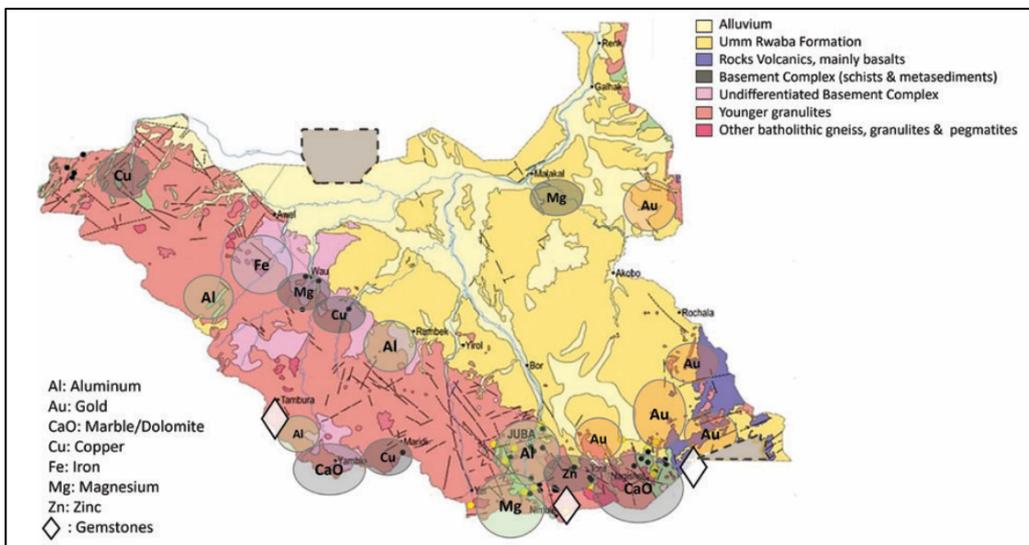


Figure 2.2 (Opportunities for Mineral Exploitation, South Sudan Ministry of Mining, 2024)

Gold also represents the largest non-oil export in South Sudan, but the numbers may be unfaithful to the real situation, in which smuggling and illegal trade is an extremely present issue. Despite the numerous challenges related to such a delicate sector, the South Sudanese government has shown a renewed interest in its thorough formalization; the approval of the Mining Act (2012)⁷⁴ and the subsequent licenses released in 2015 provide a new framework for operations, which is nevertheless weakened by the lack of a systematic legislative application.

⁷³ The World Bank Group (2024). South Sudan Natural Resources Review.

⁷⁴ South Sudan Ministry of Mining (2012). *Mining Act*. Laws of South Sudan.

Notwithstanding the extreme potential that South Sudan's mineral extraction industry appears to present, the country's most available and reliable natural resource is undoubtedly oil, mainly present in the regions of Bentiu, Jonglei, Warrap, and Lakes. Prior to independence, South Sudan already produced close to 85% of the whole Sudanese oil output; after the conclusion of the conflict between the two countries and the negotiations concluded with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, it was determined that oil revenues should have been equally split equally between the two counterparts for the entire duration of the agreement period, balancing the presence of the extraction sites on South Sudanese territory and possibility for the country to rely on pipelines, refineries, and port facilities geographically located in Sudan. Notwithstanding the enthusiastic realization of such accords, the relationship between the two countries related to oil extraction, refinement, and commerce immediately deteriorated, causing the outbreak of several disputes over the possession of natural resources sites, analyzed in the following paragraph. Due to this tension, the oil production in South Sudan endured a dramatic decrease in 2012⁷⁵, when the government decided to shut down the works in all oilfields. Subsequently, once the production started to ramp up again, the outburst of the civil war⁷⁶ caused major disruption to the industries and facilities, delivering a significant blow to South Sudan's oil economy. After the signing of the peace agreement in 2018, a series of climatic variations, local conflict, and economic shocks have continued to hamper oil production, resulting in a steady decline in output. In addition to these irregular disturbances, the downward trend in output may also be related to the natural decline in oil field productivity. In the near future, the enhancement of oil recovery techniques could potentially improve recovery rates, but substantial investment would be needed. Similarly, a large investment would be necessary to confirm commercial reserves and open new wellheads in additional concession areas. Notwithstanding the difficult interpretation of the current political climate in South Sudan, the government has recently announced⁷⁷ a new plan aimed at boosting the production of crude oil. According to future projections, the oil production in the country is set to maintain a satisfactory level, close to 100.000 barrels per day until 2035.

⁷⁵ See Figure 2.3.

⁷⁶ See Chapter Three.

⁷⁷ Ponnio, S. (2025). South Sudan announces plan to resume oil production. Voice of America.

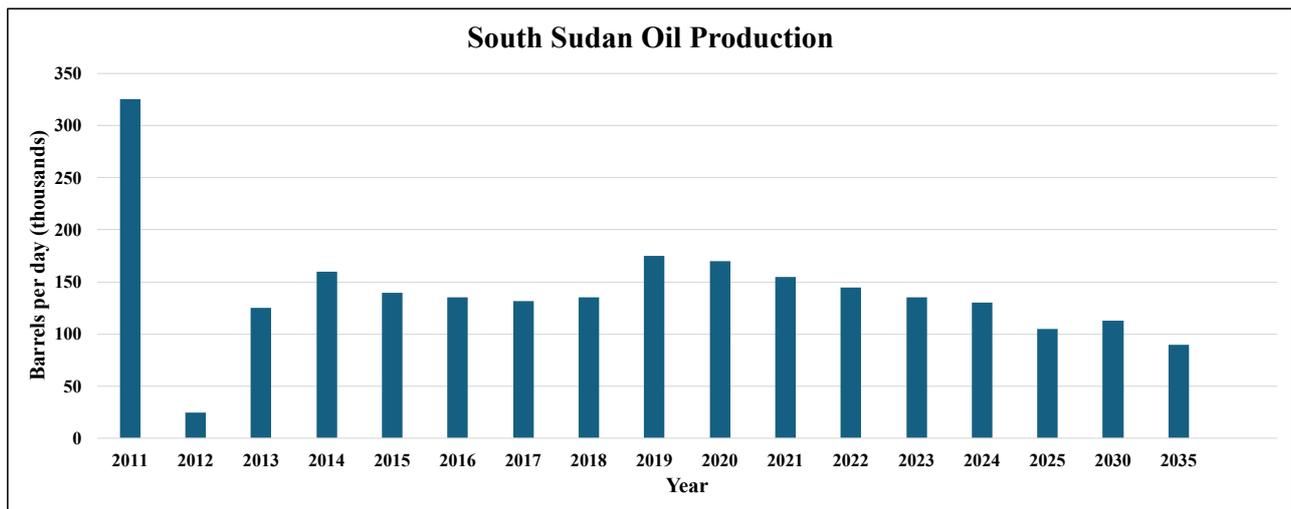


Figure 2.3 (Ministry of Petroleum, Statistical Review of World Energy, BP and Energy Institute)

Naturally, such a productive oil extraction industry represents a pivotal source for economic production and development for South Sudan. According to the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning⁷⁸, oil revenues constitute to this day more than 98% of the government of the country's budget, which can be translated into more than \$8 billion in revenue since the signing of the peace agreement. In latest times, a significant amount of foreign-based oil drilling has begun in South Sudan, raising the land's geopolitical status and profile. In fact, numerous extractions sites were acquired and controlled by large overseas consortium, such as the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPOC)⁷⁹, composed by the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (40% stake), Petronas (Malaysia, with 30%), the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (India, with 25%), and NILEPET (Sudan, with 5%). The immediate anomaly in such list of players sits in the total absence of the United States of America, which nevertheless has a simple explanation: due to the presence of Sudan on the US list of State sponsors of terrorism, paired with Khartoum's insistence upon receiving a share of the profit from any oil deal South Sudan conducts internationally, American oil companies cannot do business with landlocked South Sudan. Thus, US companies have virtually no presence in the South Sudanese oil sector.

Furthermore, in recent times the large availability of oil in South Sudan has pushed many international players not only to monitor its production and extraction, but also to invest in the realization of infrastructure for the development of the oil industry in the country. Given its renewed interest in the African continent and the massive investments done in the area after the approval of the ambitious project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), meant to expand the country's sphere of

⁷⁸ <https://mofp.gov.ss/>.

⁷⁹ <https://nilepet.com/gpoc/>.

influence in the Global South, the most interested foreign superpower is undoubtedly China. According to many reports⁸⁰, the People's Republic of China has offered to extend a line of credit of \$8 billion to South Sudan for several years, while an alternative pipeline to the Kenyan coast is laid and an export deal is worked out with the Kenyan government, even if this last scenario is regarded as less likely than a continued South Sudanese dependence on Sudanese infrastructure. If such deal was struck, though, and South Sudan started to export oil from Kenyan ports instead of Sudanese routes, the US would consequently become a potential trade partner of South Sudan, and even a South Sudanese oil importer, given the potential exclusion of Sudan from the chain of commerce. In the meantime, given the difficulties of the scenario's realization, the South Sudanese government intends to lobby the US to ease restrictions on American companies doing business with Sudan. Nevertheless, China is not the only major economic force to monitor what analysts have assessed as the third largest oil reserves in Africa. In fact, notwithstanding its notorious partnership with China and its markets, enforced by the simultaneous presence of both countries in BRICS, the main rival concurring for the control on the South Sudanese oil extraction industry is South Africa. In 2018, South Sudan's Oil Minister confirmed the intention of South Africa to invest \$1 billion in the country's oil sector, paving the way for what would be the largest investment in the East African country's history. With the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)⁸¹ between the two countries' Energy Ministers, the interest in the concretization of such efforts appears to be true, but the details are yet to be defined, mainly due to the profound presence of Beijing in the matter. As for all the other sectors related to South Sudan's availability and exploitation of natural resources, the risk of outbreak for conflicts, both on an internal and on an international scale, must always be considered, also due to the precedents which the country has already had to endure.

2.2 CASE STUDIES ON NATURAL RESOURCES DISPUTES

Having mentioned the potentially florid natural resources situation that South Sudan verses into, it may be useful to keep track of the main natural resources disputes that have invested the country, starting from the date of independence. As a matter of fact, the development of a well-productive natural resources extraction industry, paired with the newly found availability of natural elements on South Sudanese soil, has generated several grounds for conflict, both from an internal and an international standpoint.

⁸⁰ <https://www.dw.com/en/china-offers-billions-in-loans-to-south-sudan/a-15916519>.

⁸¹ Memorandum Of Understanding Between The Government Of The Republic Of South Africa And The Government Of The Republic Of South Sudan Regarding The Cooperation In The Field Of Oil And Gas; 2024.

2.2.1 The Heglig Oil Dispute

Both from a chronological and relative importance point of view, the most prominent resource-based conflict that has invested South Sudan could be easily identified in the so-called Heglig Oil Dispute⁸², the natural conclusion to a series of tensions, abuses, and force demonstrations between South Sudan and its most prominent partner and adversary from a natural resources' standpoint: Sudan.

After the independence and the signing of the aforementioned Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which details have already been illustrated, the first frictions related to the South Sudanese oil industry issue started to warm up in April 2012, when the newly recognized Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), an armed organ of the newborn Republic of South Sudan, militarily occupied the Heglig oil field, an extremely important and well-functioning extraction site located exactly on the border between South Sudan's Unity State and Sudan's South Kordofan State⁸³. Such deliberate act of occupation was immediately denounced by the African Union, which deemed it to be illegal and unacceptable, especially coming at the end of years of mediation between the two counterparts. The conflict immediately gained relevance on an international scale, with the United Nations Security Council, the European Union, and the United States of America simultaneously condemning the development and the military escalation of the situation. In reality, the seizure of Heglig was located at the end of a series of attacks ignited by Sudanese forces and directed towards the South Sudanese border population; the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) obtained armed control of the contended Abyei region only a year before, justifying the action with an alleged provocation by SPLA police, which was subsequently silently accepted by the international community.

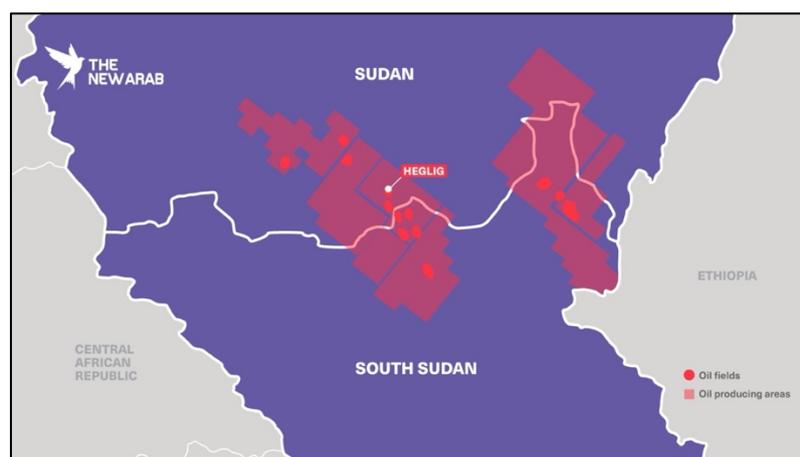


Figure 2.4 (Heglig Oil Field)

⁸² Johnson, D.H. (2012). *The Heglig Oil Dispute Between Sudan and South Sudan*. Journal of Eastern African Studies.

⁸³ See Figure 2.4

Once the delicate situation deflated, the Khartoum forces employed the same excuse of provocation to launch yet another attack on the SPLA troops deployed in the states of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. The fighting and armed conflict continued in both border states, eventually leading to massive displacement, refugee movements, aerial bombardments, and ground incursions, and finally culminating in the occupation of the Heglig oil field.

But the issue of Heglig is not simply related to a matter of security, given its diplomatic impact which cannot be ignored. In fact, the oil field directly lies along the borderline between the two countries, and claims on its property rights have been advanced by both Sudan and South Sudan. The two countries even call it by different names, respectively Panthou or Aliiny in South Sudan, and Heglig in Sudan. According to the international supervisors⁸⁴, the solution to such issue is to be found in its historical roots; the border established in 1956 clearly shows Heglig to sit within Sudanese borders, thus leading to the condemnation of South Sudan's behavior as international malpractice. Nevertheless, still to this day there has been no agreement on the exact line that the 1956 border established, and there has never been any formal and physical demarcation of that border on the ground. Thus, the development of such a delicate situation is to be found in the natural resource proliferation of the bordering grounds. In fact, the discovery of oil in the late 1970s immediately created tensions between the Khartoum government and the (at the time) Southern Regional Government in Juba, given that oil was immediately and rightfully declared a Sudanese national resource. With the official institution of the first oil fields (Unity and Heglig), alongside their formal annexation to the Sudanese Kordofan region, massive protests and uprisings started to outbreak from the Southern Regional Government, which eventually resulted in an unsettled dispute over the statal possession of such land. The eruption of the civil war brought an end to oil exploitation within the State of Upper Nile until the 1990s, when the SAF and allied militias cleared large areas of their civilian populations. The establishment of Sudan's oil industry in South Sudan's Unity State was accomplished through massive demographic displacement of its indigenous inhabitants, especially along the old provincial boundary lines. The territory of Panaru, in particular, was cleansed of its occupants to make way for the development and expansion of the oil industry. Nevertheless, up until 2003, it was generally accepted by the international community that Panthou (or Heglig) was rightfully a part of the South Sudanese Unity State, but as the Comprehensive Peace Agreements were drawing to a conclusion, it was contrarily stated that Heglig belonged to the Sudanese Western

⁸⁴ Dr. Alex de Waal, adviser to the African Union High Implementation Panel and public commentator on Sudanese affairs.

Kordofan State. In the following years, the subsequent international conferences⁸⁵ finally determined the territory to be a part of Sudan, but no formally recognized border map confirmed such assertion. After the independence of South Sudan, the newborn government asserted its claim over Panthou/Heglig, stating that the issue was still to be resolved in the North-South border demarcation process. Following such logic, any government or international body that declared that Heglig was “internationally recognized” as part of Sudan had been premature at best and prejudicial to a final resolution at worst. In conclusion, the question that still to this day has to be solved is whether Panthou/Heglig is east or west of the boundary line established in 1931. If it sits on the east, it is part of Unity State (South Sudan); if west, it is part of Southern Kordofan (Sudan). Given the latest developments, it appears that no solution is expected to be found in a short amount of time, but the possibility of the establishment of a boundary line bisecting the oil field, giving both sides a claim to the oil within, is still strong⁸⁶.

2.2.2 Internal Natural Resources Conflicts: The Case of Cattle Raids

A further extremely relevant and common issue in the framework of resources-based conflicts, which may appear odd in a Western-like perspective, relates to the strongly diffused practice of cattle raids, which have been a source of communal violence in the country for decades, if not centuries.

Bearing in mind that South Sudan is composed by more than sixty ethnic groups, the presence of pastoral communities within the country is traditional and still diffused to this day. In such communities, cattle represent an indicator of social standing and wealth, often used in restorative justice and marriage practices, and the act of cattle raiding in itself demonstrates a male youth's transition from adolescence to maturity. Thus, the significance of cattle to some South Sudanese peoples has historically placed them at the center of confrontations between different communities.

In South Sudan's Jonglei State, patterns of pastoralist migration are driven by seasonal environmental changes. During the dry seasons communities living in more arid regions move their cattle towards more florid and water-equipped areas. As a result of these migration movements, adversary communities are brought into closer proximity and are prone to become engaged in conflicts over access to these essential resources. During the 2010s, the frequency and intensity of these clashes in the area of Jonglei has escalated significantly, catalyzed by insecurity and the legacy

⁸⁵ Presented by the Abyei Boundaries Commission (ABC) in 2005 and the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in 2009.

⁸⁶ Downie, R. (2012). *The Two Sudans on the Brink*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

of a civil war spanning three decades, eventually surging to a relevance which granted them the coin of the term "Pastoral Wars." Large infrequent raids, coupled with repeated small-scale incidents, have fostered conditions of insecurity and entrenched poverty within the pastoral communities, and the situation was aggravated by severe drought prolonging the dry season, increasing the necessity of migration, and reducing the abundance of contested resources. In this case study, climate change is best understood as a conflict multiplier, exacerbating the factors of environmental degradation that drive on-going patterns of violence⁸⁷. That being said, tribal conflict in South Sudan, especially among pastoral communities in Jonglei, is by no means a new phenomenon, since it has been a part of life for generation of Nuer, Dinka, and Murle tribes.

Paradoxically enough, the end of the second civil war⁸⁸ and the subsequent disarmament campaign conducted by the SPLA exacerbated the motives and frequency of pastoral conflicts, as the absence of a ruling force in the country opened a power vacuum immediately exploited by cattle raiders, which increased the number and the intensity of the raids. Alongside this shift, even the characteristics of violence associated to cattle raiding changed dramatically, shifting from actions perpetrated by a limited number of raiders resulting in few deaths to proper massacres committed by organized militia, such as the Murle and Lou Nuer massacre of 2009, which led to more than 2.500 casualties. The spiral of violence did not cease in the following years, eventually raising the attention of former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, who promised to send peacekeepers and civilian personnel to deter violence in the State. In order to ease the peace processes, in August 2014 women of the Nuer and Dinka communities met for the "Bor Reconciliation and Healing Dialogue"⁸⁹. This was the first time since the outbreak of violent conflict that a peace conference took place. The conference was spearheaded by local pastors, supported by the UN Development Programme (UNDP)⁹⁰ and hosted by the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)⁹¹. Since the conference, there have been no reports of fighting between the two groups. However, it is unlikely that the conflict will be completely resolved in the near future, as several thousands of Nuer continue to look for shelter in UN.

⁸⁷ Richardson, T. (2011). *Pastoral Violence in Jonglei*. ICE Case Study Number 274.

⁸⁸ See Chapter Three.

⁸⁹ Dinka and Nuer women meet for peace in Bor; <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/dinka-and-nuer-women-meet-for-peace-in-bor>.

⁹⁰ <https://www.undp.org/>.

⁹¹ <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/>.

2.3 WATER SECURITY IN SOUTH SUDAN: RISKS AND CHALLENGES

The final remark which needs to be explored in this limited but useful analysis of South Sudan's natural resources framework relates to one of the most pressing issues the whole African continent is currently enduring, and, according to projections which will be analyzed further, is expected to keep under surveillance: water security. In fact, the issue of water scarcity, profoundly intertwined with the phenomenon of climate change, represents the most important challenge that South Sudan is set to experience, especially in light of the rise in the population and the observed demographic trends which will impact the country in the near future. In general, the term water security entails the capacity of a country's population to safeguard sustainable access to adequate quantities of acceptable quality water for human well-being; under the notion of water security for people, access to safely managed water supply, sanitation, and hygiene services represent an essential part of improving human health and dignity, alongside helping to reduce the risk of infectious disease outbreaks. However, the benefits of water security for people do not just include improved health outcomes; they also result in important quality-of-life benefits, such as reduced vulnerability to violence and assault, especially for women; time savings; and environmental quality.

2.3.1 Natural Disasters and Environmental Impact

The first facet that water security in South Sudan involves directly relates to the issue of climate change, as it refers to the potential damage and impact resulting from the natural condition of the country.

In fact, from a climatic standpoint, South Sudan is highly exposed to variable meteorological cycles and natural disasters, the most impactful ones being floods, an occurrence which torments the country on a yearly basis. The periodic rate of rainfalls is mainly concentrated over the highlands in the southwest, and the wet season lasts from May to October, making extensive annual floods a feature of large parts of central and eastern South Sudan. Commonly to many countries of East Africa, fluctuating rainfall patterns have increased the magnitude and unpredictability of cycles of flood and drought in the country. In recent years, vast floods have inundated large areas of the floodplain, leading to loss of life, massive displacement of people, and severe disruption to agricultural and pastoral livelihoods: floodwaters inundated extensive areas from 2020 to 2023, with the submerged region in 2022 encompassing more than 30% of the country's global territory. Paradoxically enough,

notwithstanding the recent flooding, drought remains a hazard across much of the country, particularly in the northeast.

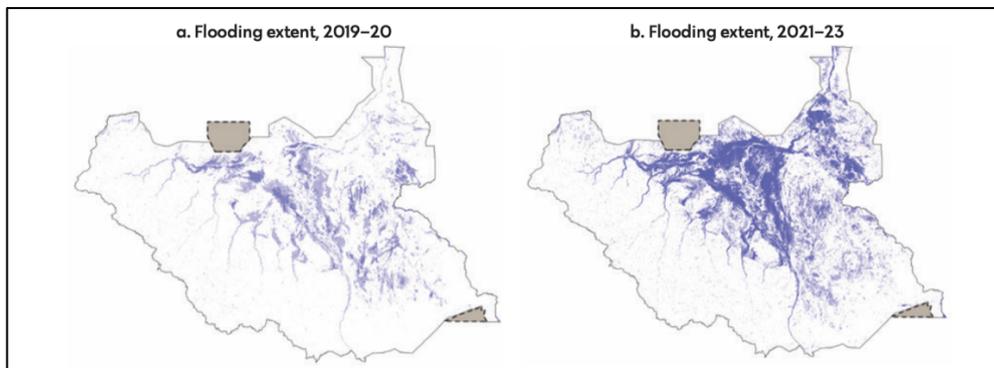


Figure 2.5 (UN Satellite Center, Flood Monitoring over South Sudan, 2024)

In 2022, South Sudan was ranked as the world’s most vulnerable country to climate change and has the lowest level of coping capacity⁹². Recently, extreme floods in 2020, 2021, and 2022 were a stark reminder of the country’s extremely high exposure to flood hazards, aggravated by the growing impact of climate change. On a global scale, South Sudan ranks 7th out of 165 countries in terms of proportion of country population exposed to river floods in an average year; in particular, the country is comprehended within the category of extremely high risk of flooding, given that 4.4 in a hundred citizens would be potentially affected by river floods in a year. In order for a country to be inserted in the extremely high-risk category, the proportion has to be more than one in one hundred citizens, according to the Aqueduct Global Map 4.0 Data⁹³.



Figure 2.6 (River Flood Risk Score, The World Bank Group)

⁹² The World Bank Group (2023). Water Security and Fragility: Insights from South Sudan.

⁹³ World Resources Institute (2023). *Aqueduct 4.0 Current and Future Global Maps Data*. <https://www.wri.org/data/aqueduct-global-maps-40-data>.

The situation appears to be even worsened if observed in light of another indicator, realized through a collaboration between the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group on Risk, Early Warning and Preparedness and the European Commission, called the INFORM risk index⁹⁴. The overall INFORM risk index identifies countries at risk from humanitarian crises and disasters that could overwhelm national response capacity. It consists of three dimensions, namely hazards and exposure, vulnerability and lack of coping capacity, which can be used to group countries based on their current level of risk and the trend over previous years. For example, large increases in countries already with high levels of risk could be used to prioritize them for increased crisis and disaster prevention, preparedness and response. According to the INFORM results, South Sudan has one of the highest levels of risk at a global level; at an institutional level, it ranks first worldwide for lack of coping capacity and first in terms of socio-economic vulnerability, an element which aggravates even more the effects and impact that numerous and substantial floods have on the population.

Delving more in depth within the matter of floods and water availability in South Sudan, the country's water endowment is evidently profoundly intertwined with the Nile river basin, one of the most complex riverine systems worldwide. In fact, the majority of South Sudan's surface and groundwater resources sit within this basin, whose variable flows inevitably influence the country's water availability and the occurrence of droughts and floods. The country can be virtually divided into three major hydrogeological units: the Bahr el Ghazal, which flows through the Sudd wetlands to Lake No, where it joins the White Nile; the Bahr el Jebel, which passes through the Sudd swamps and where eventually it loses much of its volume through evaporation and dispersal; and the Baro-Akobo-Sobat, which individually contributes to 48% of the flow of the White Nile. These three sub-basins converge into the White Nile in the northeast of the country, creating the Upper Nile sub-basin. In recent times, the impacts of floods and droughts in the country are growing for a variety of reasons: not only because climate change is increasing their frequency and intensity, but also because protracted armed conflict and forced displacement are pushing more people and assets into harm's way. In recent times, South Sudan suffered three consecutive years of exceptionally severe flooding in 2019, 2020 and 2021, and climate outlooks indicate that the upcoming rainy seasons will likely also bring above-average rainfall and flooding.

From the point of view of the impact of water security on economic production and industry, South Sudan showcases a severe lack of availability of water in the country. Notwithstanding the latest developments and plans, the chances of improvement through the collection and reutilization

⁹⁴ European Commission. *DRMKC – INFORM 2025*. <https://drmkc.jrc.ec.europa.eu/inform-index>.

of rainwater are even more shortened by the limited large-scale water infrastructure in the country⁹⁵. In fact, South Sudan actually has a significant hydropower and irrigation potential, which is nevertheless sided by acute flood protection needs, which could potentially threaten the major wetlands. Furthermore, the majority of the present water facilities were damaged or destroyed during the civil wars⁹⁶, and existing flood protection structures are to this day poorly maintained. In addition, South Sudan's hydrometric monitoring network is extremely weak; the country lacks capabilities for surface water quality monitoring, sediment sampling, and groundwater quantity and quality measurement. Polders have been constructed to protect several large settlements from flooding, but there are no large dams as yet in the country. The roughly two-thirds of the 360 km Jonglei Canal that were completed before the excavating machinery was destroyed in 1983 represents by far the largest water infrastructure development in South Sudan, but the project was never completed. Finishing the project would have major hydrological impacts on the Sudd, which would need to be carefully assessed and weighed against potential benefits. South Sudan has considerable potential for hydropower, and a number of potential dam projects have been identified, mostly in the hillier borderlands where the Nile and other rivers enter the country. With flooding being a critical problem, large-scale engineering solutions for flood control will remain of interest, although options are limited, since large water infrastructure projects can have a much larger footprint than their physical works, given that they could enormously impact hydrology and water resources, critical for fisheries and wildlife. In fact, impoundment by dams and river channel modifications disrupts natural water cycles, affecting fish habitats, breeding, foraging patterns, and seasonal migration. Even small-scale water infrastructure and extraction, such as from farmer-led irrigation, can have significant cumulative impacts on hydrology and water quality if they become widespread; the loss of wetlands and functional floodplains would not only affect local fisheries and biodiversity, but it would also disrupt regional climate and groundwater recharge systems. Conversely, forests and vegetation play a critical role in maintaining watershed functions, supporting hydropower and flood risk management. Hence, synergies are possible between protection of natural habitats and well-managed water infrastructure development and should be promoted with extreme relevance in South Sudan's economic agenda.

The displaced and diffused hydrological irregularity observable in South Sudan also means that the country is enormously exposed to the risk of droughts, which have in fact displayed significant territorial and seasonal inconsistency between 1982 and 2021. In general, droughts tend

⁹⁵ The World Bank Group (2024). *South Sudan Natural Resources Review*. Chapter Two.

⁹⁶ See Chapter Three.

to be more frequent in south-eastern and north-eastern regions, particularly in the Eastern Equatoria, Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile states. In these areas, droughts can affect the mobility options of pastoralists and others who rely on natural resources for their livelihoods, bringing them into competition with neighboring communities and increasing the risk of cattle raids. From a historical perspective, two extremely impactful drought events occurred in 1984 and 2008, when droughts had very large spatial footprints, directly reducing rainfall levels across more than 50% of the country. According to statistical models such as the Standardized Precipitation Index (SPI), a metric used to track precipitation-related drought, the situation of South Sudan can be easily addressed from a statistical and visual standpoint. The SPI values are to be interpreted as the number of standard deviations by which the observed precipitation anomaly deviates from the long-term mean. Data⁹⁷ showcases the high temporal variability of drought in South Sudan, which is characterized by the alternation of drought-rich periods in the 1980s and in the 2000s (negative SPI) with relatively wetter periods in the 1990s and 2010s (positive SPI)⁹⁸.

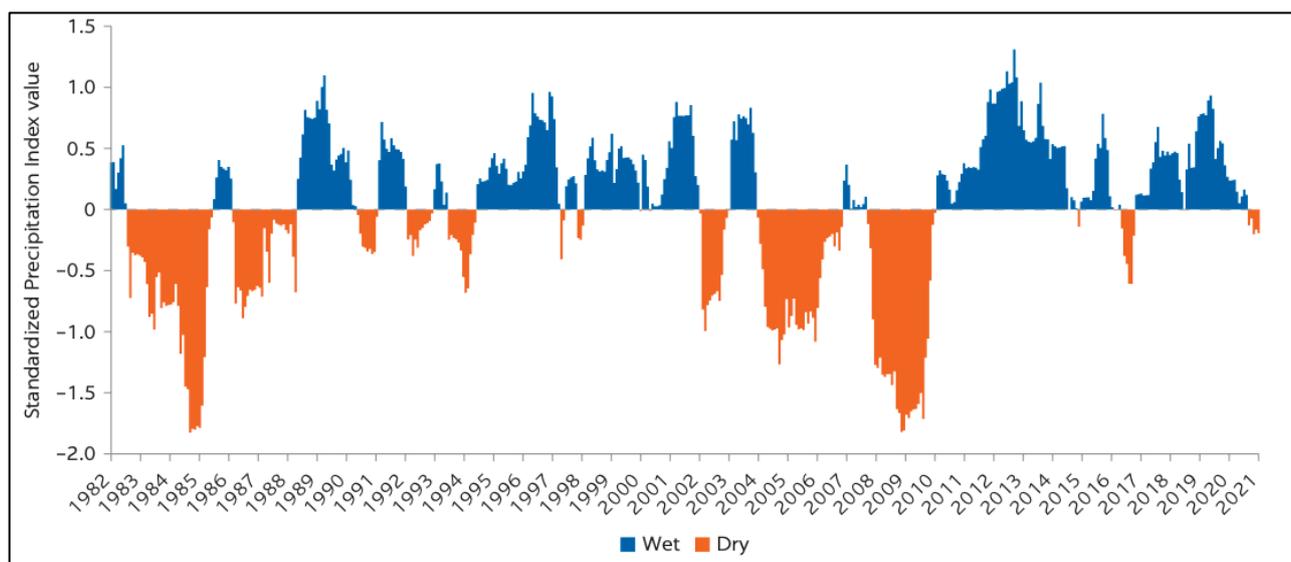


Figure 2.7 (Standardized Precipitation Index, 1982-2021)

2.3.2 Humanitarian and Social Consequences

As happens in the majority of the African countries affected by a situation of high water stress, the issue of water shortage does not only represent an economic and environmental problem, but even (and prevalently) a humanitarian and social one of the utmost importance, given that in its various

⁹⁷ World Bank, using CHIRPS data.

⁹⁸ See Figure 2.7

roles for people, production, and protection, water is an upstream driver of better population health and nutrition and, when poorly managed, can lead to negative impacts.

As already mentioned in the previous paragraphs, the whole area of the Horn of Africa is commonly identified as a water stress region, and even though South Sudan does not strike as one of the most compromised countries on the matter, the issue still represents a ticking bomb, especially when observed in light of the recent demographic trends. As for the current situation⁹⁹, 59% of the South Sudanese population is experiencing a lack in access to clean water. In order to survive, families are often forced to drink dangerous water, enhancing the risk of production and diffusion of waterborne diseases such as cholera and diarrhea, which still remain the leading causes of death among children in South Sudan, ranked third in relation to the rate of diarrheal deaths within the African continent. During periods of drought, farmers without reliable sources of water to grow food cannot feed their families or make income from selling crops. More frequent and heavier flood events attributable to a changing climate create breeding grounds for disease-carrying vectors, causing illness, anemia, and energy deprivation. Recognizing both the dramatic and subtle relationships between water, health, and nutrition highlights the need to formulate policy and investments that help mitigate risks and boost the benefits of water investments. Although substantial efforts were made following independence in 2011 to operationalize a governance structure for water supply and sanitation, along with significant donor investment to expand rural access to improved drinking water supply, develop small-scale water distribution systems, and improve access to safe drinking water and sanitation in urban areas, the bulk of these efforts were eroded in the subsequent conflicts. Civil wars not only destroyed water infrastructure but also made it obsolete because of population displacement or lack of management¹⁰⁰. Moreover, the emphasis during the period following independence was almost exclusively on building infrastructure, with less attention to sustainable operation and maintenance of the completed schemes or financial viability of utilities. As a result, access to at least basic drinking water has stagnated in South Sudan since 2011¹⁰¹. Observing the trends, a proportionally larger share of the population has gained over time access to limited service, with an increase from 24.4% in 2011 to 37.4% in 2020. The share of the population that relies on surface water declined from 20.9% in 2011 to 8.1% in 2020, with the population mostly shifting to limited sources in rural areas and at least basic sources in urban areas.

⁹⁹ Oluwasanya G. et al. (2022). *Water Security in Africa: A Preliminary Assessment*. United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU INWEH).

¹⁰⁰ See Chapter Three.

¹⁰¹ See Figure 2.7

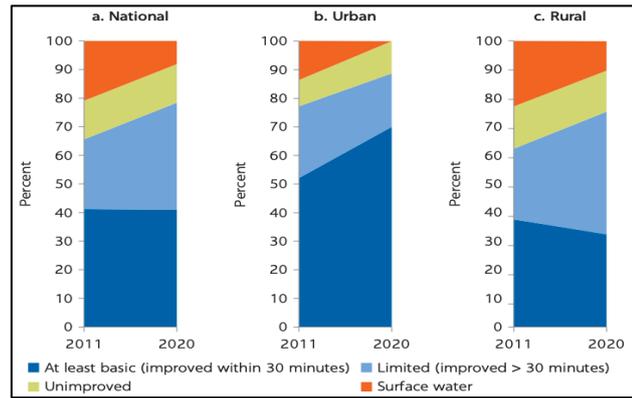


Figure 2.7 (Population with access to drinking water services, 2011-2020)

In general, seasonal water access in South Sudan varies sharply at subnational levels, with most states and administrative areas having lower access to basic water supply during the rainy season; between 2010 and 2020, access to basic drinking increased in 5 out of 10 states¹⁰² in the country¹⁰³, but quality standards are still far from being met. According to data published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), water service provision is not always meeting internationally established targets (the World Health Organization’s recommended amount of at least 20 liters of water per capita per day to meet basic hygiene needs and ensure basic food hygiene), and the quality of water services in South Sudan, especially in refugee settings, is generally low¹⁰⁴. Accessibility, quality, and affordability challenges further constrain access to drinking water, given that almost 15% of households without dry season access to an improved drinking water source report walking more than 4 kilometers to gather water.

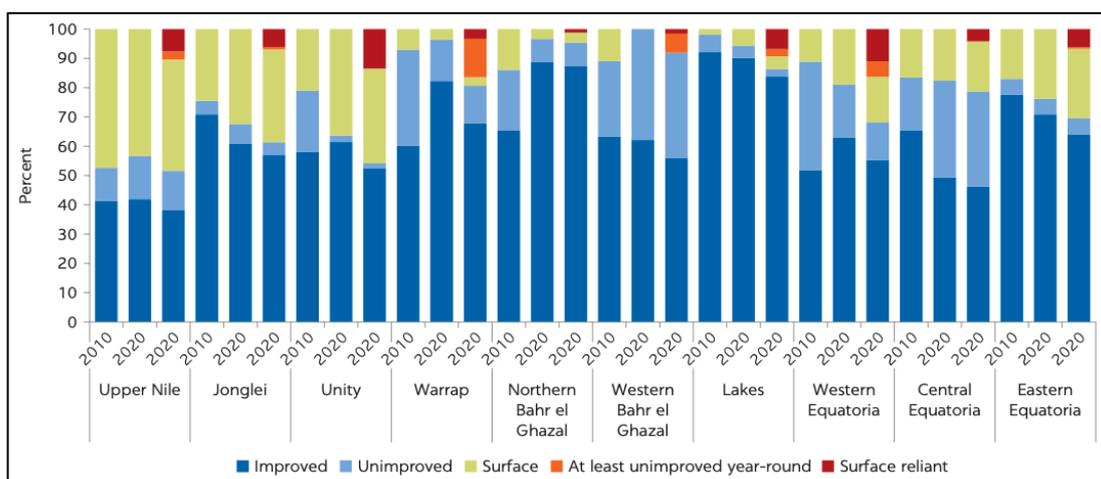


Figure 2.8 (Trends in Access to Drinking Water Supply, World Bank)

¹⁰² See Figure 2.8

¹⁰³ Borgomeo, E., Chase, C., Godoy, N.S., Kwadwo, V.O. (2023). *Rising from the Depths; Water Security and Fragility in South Sudan*. World Bank Group.

¹⁰⁴ UNHCR 2022.

Despite an appreciable general increase in access to drinkable water numbers, there appears to be a high likelihood that many water sources in the country are contaminated. In fact, evidence¹⁰⁵ indicates that water treatment practices are very low in South Sudan, notwithstanding the efforts and publications by international organizations regarding guidelines on drinking water quality. Even though systematic data on water quality are not available for South Sudan, a few ad hoc surveys have been conducted, showcasing abnormal bacterial growth in different water samples distributed in urban centers. The issue of water availability also strongly depends on affordability; 39% of households¹⁰⁶ report water in the top three sources of familiar expenditure, with a high priority given to the purchase of water over other household expenses.

2.3.3 Climate Change, Environmental Degradation, and Livelihood Worsening

In summation, it appears evident how climate change, environmental degradation, and conflicts are profoundly intertwined, given that all three act as a catalyst for the worsening situation of livelihoods in South Sudan. In a domino effect, the impact affects political factors, which in turn aggravate tensions and existing vulnerabilities. In this sense, decades of conflict and insecurity have disrupted many livelihood systems and altered related production and trade patterns; since the Second Sudanese Civil War¹⁰⁷, livelihood systems have been profoundly changed by conflict, displacement, resettlements, reduced kinship ties, and humanitarian aid.

These factors, associated to demographic pressures and changes in population density already observed in Chapter One, have seriously disrupted mobility patterns and access to water and land resources over the years. These negativities have had ripple effects on food security, enhancing the risk of food shortages, while conflict and insecurity are expected to remain the major pressure on livelihoods moving forward, as resettlements continue, risks of cattle raids or predation remain high, and security of land tenure, whether legally or customarily defined, remains low¹⁰⁸. Climate change is also straining livelihoods through its impacts on water resources availability and extremes; although livelihoods have adapted to South Sudan's high levels of hydrological variability, the frequency and intensity of floods and droughts under climate change will exceed this envelope of variability and cause unprecedented stress on livelihoods. Droughts to this day still systematically lead to fodder and water shortages, which eventually translate to higher mortality among animals and decreased crop

¹⁰⁵ Water Information Management System (2021).

¹⁰⁶ High Frequency South Sudan Survey (2012–16).

¹⁰⁷ See Chapter Three.

¹⁰⁸ Ding, A., et al. (2021). *South Sudan: Youth, Violence and Livelihoods*; Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF) South Sudan.

production. Moreover, droughts might also lead pastoralists to sell more of their livestock, causing an oversupply of typically undernourished animals that fetch low prices in markets and thus make individuals more prone to finding alternative means of recouping their losses, including cattle raiding or joining violent groups¹⁰⁹.

Another key factor in the degradation of livelihood may be found in the country's natural capital degradation; more than 99% of the population of South Sudan depends on forests as their source of energy and for construction and furniture¹¹⁰. Thus, deforestation, overgrazing, and plowing are the main causes of human-induced environmental degradation, which can have negative consequences on livelihoods, especially in the highlands and pastoralists' areas, where it triggers a series of domino effects, such as fertility and nutrient loss, reduced carbon storage, and declining biodiversity. Soil erosion rates in South Sudan have been increasing since the start of the century, with global assessments pointing to a 5% increase in annual average soil erosion¹¹¹. Finally, the lack of environmental standards and guidelines to safeguard the exploration and exploitation in the extractive industry has led to pollution in the oil fields and in the surrounding areas.

As a result of the convergence of these pressures, livelihoods are being disrupted and new life sustainment systems are emerging, some of which heighten vulnerability to water-related risks. Decades of conflict and forced displacement indicate that humanitarian aid nowadays plays a fundamental role for livelihoods, for both food provisioning and inputs. The forced displacement crisis has also influenced the quality of life in South Sudan, with refugees returning to the country bringing new experiences of rural and urban living and livelihoods. Fuel wood and charcoal production supports income generation, but it also contributes to deforestation and land degradation, exacerbating vulnerability to droughts and pluvial flooding.

To conclude this chapter's analysis on environment and natural resources in South Sudan, it may be useful to draw the main plans and future projections that the country has in relation to these matters, bearing in mind the extremely peculiar demographic situation the country is in. Thus, by comparing the foreseeable future of South Sudan and the policies already in action or intended to tackle the most pressing issues, it could be possible to determine how and when such interventions could become useful, or on the contrary disrupt an already delicate situation.

¹⁰⁹ Maystadt, J., Calderone, M., You, L. (2014). *Local Warning and Violent Conflict in North and South Sudan*. Journal of Economic Geography.

¹¹⁰ United Nations Environment Program (UNEP).

¹¹¹ Borrelli, P., et al. (2020). *Land susceptibility to water and wind erosion risks in the East Africa region*. Science of the Total Environment. Volume 703.

2.4 FUTURE PROJECTIONS AND PLANS

Until now, this work has shed a limited but significant light of South Sudan's current and future demographic landscape, trying to determine which evolutionary patterns could be inferred. Furthermore, a comprehensive observation of the country's natural resources framework, paired with a brief analysis of the economic and industrial facets of such a complex and evolving context, has helped in determining which points of strength and weakness should be noted, if South Sudan wants to experience the exploit it has the potential to obtain. In fact, in light of the data and observations made up to this point, it can be useful to overview which critical points the future governmental class of South Sudan should take in consideration, trying to frame and forecast which patterns and projections could become concrete and relevant by determining both the focal elements of attention and how those criticalities could develop when observed through the lenses of demographic development, before delving into the final section of the analysis, which will consider the last variable of armed conflict outburst and escalation.

2.4.1 Outlook and Criticalities

In order to logically conclude the discourse related to natural resources, water scarcity, and climate change, it is imperative to understand the most probable evolutions that the country will endure in the near future in relation to the matter, before comparing the results with those achieved in the demographic analysis. From the viewpoint of climate change, the most relevant repercussions which South Sudan is set to endure are both related to global warming and the issue of floods and droughts. In fact, the country has already been warming at one of the fastest rates around the world; climate change is underway and already affecting both long-term and short-term patterns of hydrological variability that control the availability of water resources and the occurrence of extreme events. Over the past 30 years, average air temperatures in South Sudan have increased enormously, and the future projections seem to enhance an aggravation of the situation¹¹².

¹¹² See Figure 2.9

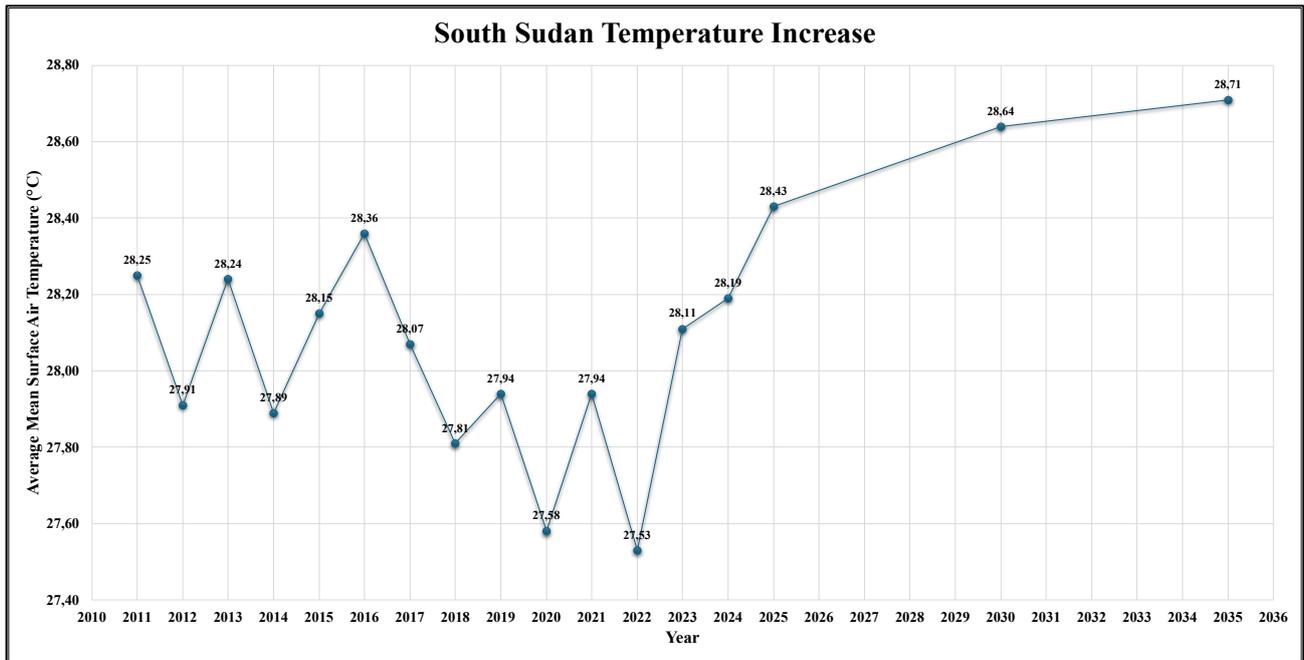


Figure 2.9 (Average Temperature in South Sudan 2011-2035, Climate Knowledge Portal, The World Bank Group)

Observing the temperature evolution¹¹³ in the timespan of the present analysis (2011-2035), two considerations need to be pointed out: first, in the years from 2011 to 2022, the average mean surface air temperature did not follow a linear evolution, remaining in a range comprised between 27,50°C and 28,40°. In this period, the spike can be seen in 2016, while the lower temperature was registered in 2022. Nevertheless, the most interesting and worrisome data is the one collected in the latest years and, most importantly, in the future projections: between 2022 and 2025, the average temperature in South Sudan increased by almost 1°C, and it is set to continue such a worrisome parable until 2035, when the average air temperature will reach an astonishing value of 28,71°C. Notwithstanding the immediate preoccupation that such a spiking temperature increase can induce, the effects are to be observed from a broader perspective. In fact, these increasing temperatures will amplify the impact of the already frequent phenomenon of droughts, as observed in the precedent paragraphs, since warming naturally leads to increased evaporation and further reductions in the availability of water¹¹⁴.

Although the climate patterns responsible for floods and droughts in South Sudan cannot be surely defined as a direct consequence of climate change, their frequency, intensity, and duration are expected to change alongside the temperatures increase. In fact, climate model analysis for South

¹¹³ Data from the Climate Knowledge Portal (The World Bank Group);

<https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/country/south-sudan/climate-data-projections>.

¹¹⁴ MacLeod, D. (2018). Seasonal predictability of onset and cessation of the east African rains. Weather and Climate Extremes. Volume 21.

Sudan suggests that drought changes follow the “dry gets drier and wet gets wetter” paradigm: under all emissions scenarios, South Sudan is projected to experience more frequent, longer, and more intense drought events by 2035. If we enlarge the scope of our analysis, under a high emissions scenario, droughts are expected to become 60–100% more frequent compared with the 2020s by the end of the century, with droughts lasting for more than 30 months¹¹⁵. With regard to flooding, the Indian Ocean Dipole and related extreme floods might occur with greater frequency, from one every 17.3 years, on average, to one event every 6.3 years, on average, under high emissions scenarios¹¹⁶.

Furthermore, the effects of climate change on the civil population of South Sudan could be also heavily intertwined with the emergence and spread of water-related infectious disease. As a matter of fact, climate change is predicted to lead to greater endemicity of some infectious diseases, while also putting new populations at risk¹¹⁷; variations in temperature and rainfall and increasing humidity, along with increased frequency and intensity of flood and drought, influence the emergence of infectious pathogens and disease vectors. Outbreaks of infectious disease occur more often and are more deadly during water-related climate shocks such as flood and drought, while the capacity for a coordinated response is challenged by the emergency nature of these events. For example, cholera outbreaks were found to be more than 100 times more likely during periods of flooding in Sub-Saharan Africa when compared with non-flood periods between 1990 and 2010, and cholera outbreaks occurred during 30 percent of drought periods during these same years. Climate and environmental factors thus influence the emergence and dispersal of a range of infectious disease pathogens, but socioeconomic conditions such as poverty, conflict, lack of access to services, poor quality health services, and underlying vulnerabilities such as malnutrition exacerbate these naturally occurring factors and play a key role in the spread of infection.

Notwithstanding the great importance that the aforementioned issues will have on the future of South Sudan, the most pressing issue related to climatic degeneration and demographic trends in the country is undoubtedly related to water scarcity. In 2022, South Sudan was re-designated as a High-Priority Country under the United States Government Global Water Strategy, approving a five-year plan to increase access to sustainable, basic drinking water services, access to basic sanitation, and uptake of key hygiene behaviors to improve health and household resilience, with an emphasis

¹¹⁵ Haile, G.G., et al. (2020). Projected Impacts of Climate Change on Drought Patterns Over East Africa. *Advancing Earth and Space Sciences*.

¹¹⁶ Borgomeo, E., Chase, C., Godoy, N.S., Kwadwo, V.O. (2023). *Rising from the Depths; Water Security and Fragility in South Sudan*. World Bank Group.

¹¹⁷ Tidman, R., Abela-Ridder, B., De Castaneda, R.R. (2021). The impact of climate change on neglected tropical diseases: a systematic review. *Oxford Academic*.

on reaching marginalized groups including women and girls. The project’s investments aim to provide access to basic water services for 100.000 people, provide basic sanitation to 75.000 people, and strengthen 30 State and country-level institutions. Since the year of its independence, South Sudan has registered steady progress in increasing access to improved water sources, with the national rate increasing from 65% in 2011 to 78% in 2020. However, the rate of access to basic water service has remained around the value of 41% over the last ten years¹¹⁸; such rate ranks South Sudan as one of the worst performing countries worldwide in the matter of access to drinkable water, and the situation appears to be even worse if we observe the expected future rates. Notwithstanding a steady and sharp increase in the numbers, less than 50% of the South Sudanese population is expected to have access to at least basic drinking water services, a reason for preoccupation if related to the expected rise in the total population of the country in the near future.

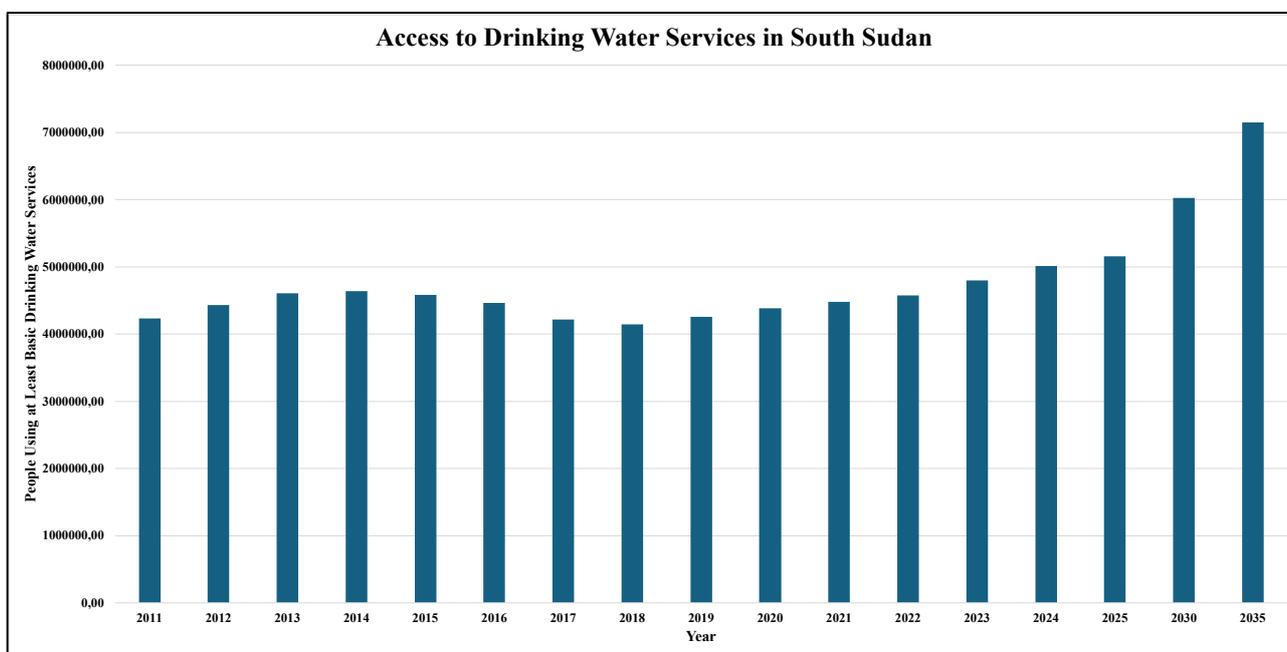


Figure 2.10 (Access to Drinking Water Services in South Sudan 2011-2035, Globalwaters data)

If we plot the obtained results with the estimates on the population evolution gathered in Chapter One, it is evident that the percentage of the population getting access to at least basic drinking water services is appalling¹¹⁹, especially considering the enormous boost in the total population South Sudan is set to achieve in the near future.

¹¹⁸ See Figure 2.10

¹¹⁹ See Figure 2.11

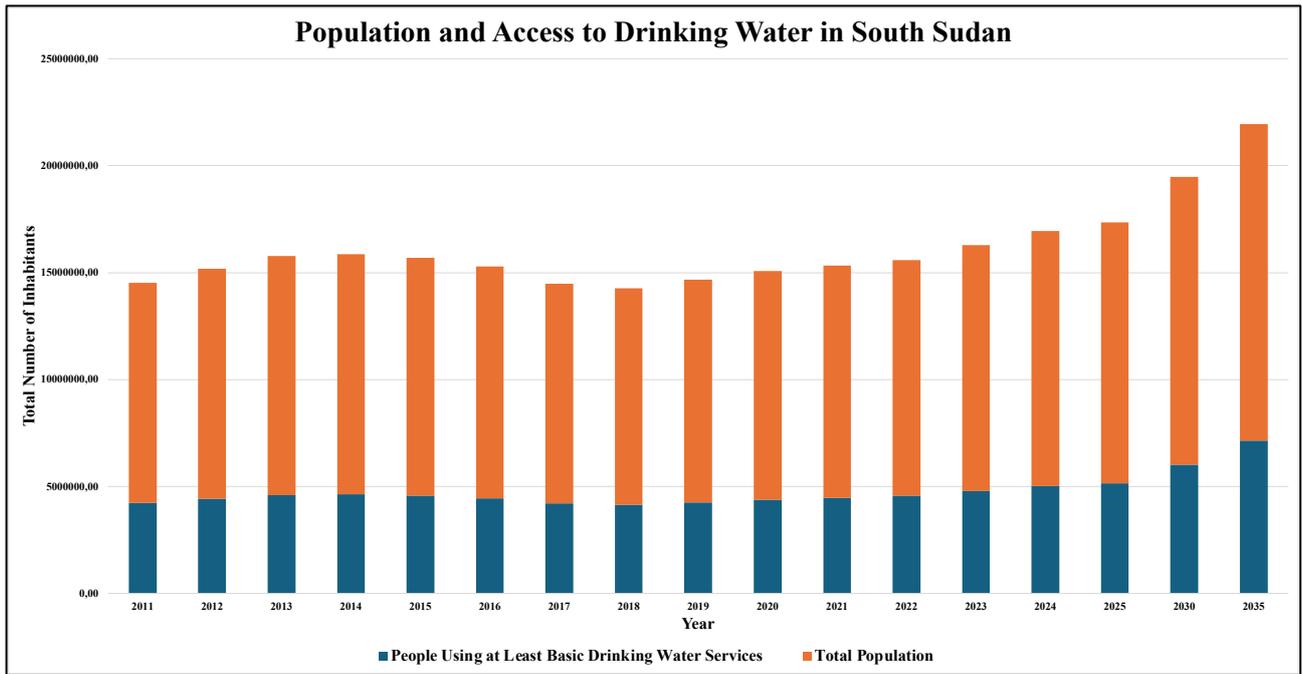


Figure 2.11 (Population and Access to Drinking Water, 2011-2035)

The last facet on which the aggravation of the water availability issue is taking an enormous toll on, particularly related to the demographic situation of South Sudan, is the one of refugees and displaced people. In fact, South Sudan is the main source of refugees in Sub-Saharan Africa and hosts one of the world’s largest internally displaced populations. More than 90% of the refugee population live in camps in the Upper Nile and Unity states (Upper Nile and Unity), and more than 70% of the internally displaced people (IDPs) live with host communities. In South Sudan, water scarcity not only triggers tensions and conflict, but creates opportunities for cooperation between the forcibly displaced and their hosts; moreover, given that groundwater is the main source of water in refugee camps and in multiple IDP settlements across South Sudan, promoting sustainable use and management of the country’s aquifers is of paramount importance to respond to the forced displacement crisis. The country presents a multilayered mix of IDPs, asylum seekers, refugees, returnees, stateless persons, and persons at risk of statelessness. Despite the approval of the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) that resulted in reduced hostilities among the main conflicting parties, violence in multiple areas across the country persists. Forced displacement was traditionally associated with armed conflict, but in recent years water-related disasters, notably floods, have triggered large-scale internal and cross-border displacement, according to the UNHCR. By observing the gathered data on asylum seekers and refugees from South Sudan¹²⁰, the situation appears to be preoccupying.

¹²⁰ See Figure 2.12

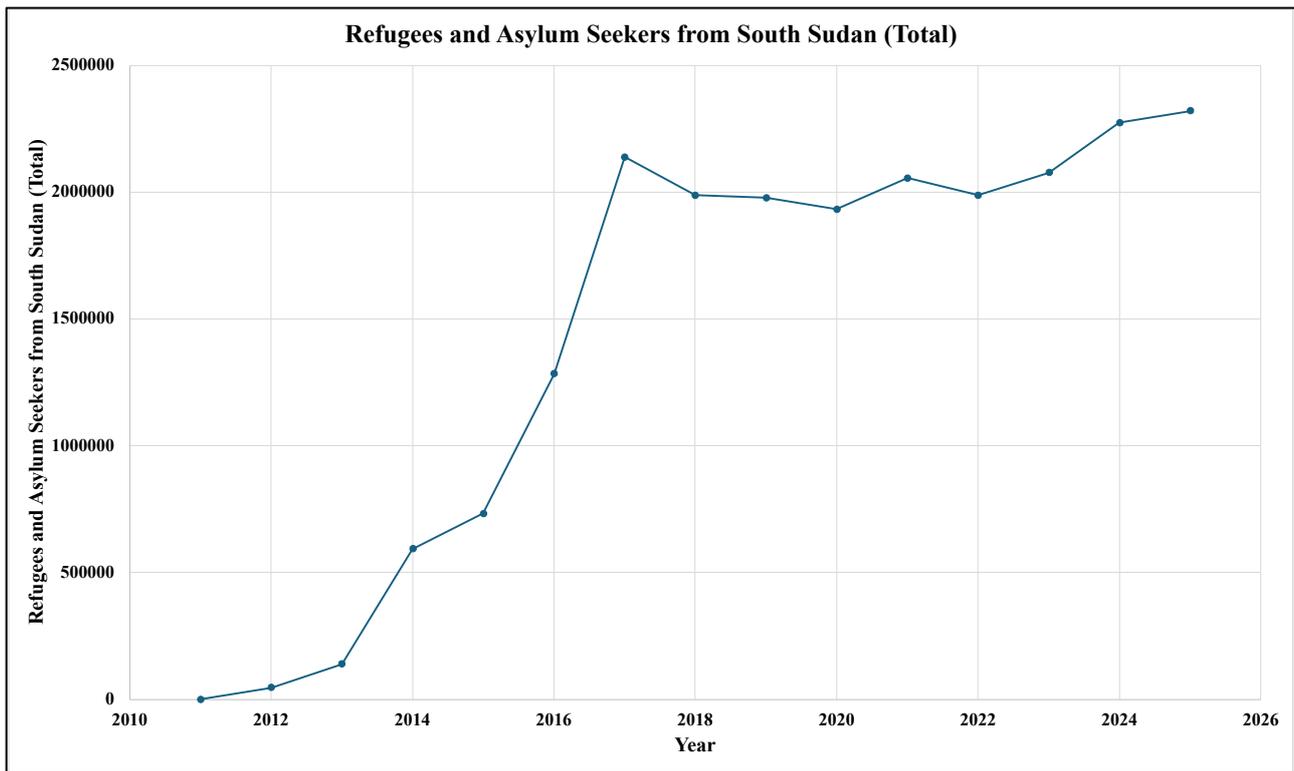


Figure 2.12 (Asylum Seekers and Refugees from South Sudan, 2012-2025, UNHCR)

As a matter of fact, only a year after the independence the situation of asylum seekers and refugees in South Sudan started to significantly worsen, rising enormously and eventually achieving its first peak in 2017, with a total of more than 2 million refugees and asylum seekers coming from the country. After 2017, the situation seems to have plateaued, but the total numbers still depict a situation of massive displacement from an incredibly young country, born with the intent of becoming a territory of hospitality and refuge. Nevertheless, the extremely volatile situation in which the country finds itself makes any forecast and future projection almost impossible to decipher, even though it is possible that the plateau will persist even in the near future. The impact of such a rise in the number of total displacements are also enhanced by contexts of water-related challenges; in South Sudan, the overcrowding and poor sanitation conditions of the settlements where refugees and IDPs find shelter, coupled with inadequate water supply, often affect the education, nutrition, health, and human development outcomes of the forcibly displaced¹²¹. As a matter of fact, waterborne diseases are prevalent in some formal and informal settlements, as well as in some refugee camps, and the use of wood for cooking and for the construction of temporary and transitional shelters contributes to the

¹²¹ WASH Cluster South Sudan.

environmental degradation of the surrounding areas (including the sources of fresh water) where the forcibly displaced are settled, often creating tensions with the hosts.

2.4.2 Potential Response and Applicable Solutions

Having highlighted the most important fragilities and focal points that South Sudan will have to deal with in the near future, both from a demographic and natural resources viewpoint, it is now possible to determine which course the country's government and international organizations are trying to apply, determining which responses can be proposed and their potential effectiveness.

The first question which needs to be addressed in this sense relates to how fragile countries like South Sudan could better harness water's potential to sustain development and stability? Water sector policy in South Sudan originated with the 2007 Water Policy, developed after the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. This policy established the vision, principles, and institutional framework for managing water resources, and recognized access to water as a human right essential to national development. Following independence in 2011, water remained a national priority in the South Sudan Development Plan and Transitional Constitution. To implement the 2007 policy, the government launched the WASH Strategic Framework (2011), promoting coordinated, government-led planning and proposing key institutions like the Water Council, WASH Regulator, and WRM Authority. Furthermore, in 2015, the approval of the Irrigation Master Plan identified priority areas, followed by a 2020–2025 Irrigation Policy to improve institutional and technical capacity. All these efforts showcase the intention of the South Sudanese government to shift from emergency relief to structured, long-term water sector development, but the legislative framework remains limited and, most importantly, underapplied.

In this formal vacuum of clear legislation, customary institutions, including chiefs, informal conflict resolution mechanisms, and customary law, practices, and beliefs thrive, gaining progressively more importance and predominance over official laws. Although customary institutions fulfill some of the principal formal functions, such as sharing information, creating incentives, and sanctioning behavior, they take the form of social and cultural norms rather than formal policies or laws. Nevertheless, customary institutions play a critical role in shaping the practices and behaviors of their respective communities, given that hierarchies of chiefs, elders, and opinion formers are all examples of customary institutions that have been recognized and have participated in public

administration since the colonial period while remaining semiautonomous from the State¹²². Customary institutions in South Sudan have long played an important role in local justice and natural resource management, and even though their influence has been declining over time, they will likely continue to play an important role in the country, especially in the protracted absence of strong formal institutions. From the viewpoint of water management, customary institutions are involved in a range of water management functions, such as resolving disputes around water access, deciding upon informal drinking water distribution, and siting water facilities, selecting water management committee members, and disseminating information to community members.

Given this peculiar and delicate situation, the overarching priority becomes to break the vicious cycle of water insecurity and fragility. Although current humanitarian modalities of water management have provided much-needed relief and saved human lives, they are a blunt instrument for helping South Sudan break this cycle. Humanitarian and emergency responses, such as temporary embankment rehabilitation and provision of rural water points, are crucial to respond to urgent challenges and meet immediate needs, but they are not well suited to providing long-term and cost-effective solutions to persistent water challenges, which are required if water is to become an engine for recovery and development and not a drag on citizens' livelihoods. In summation, a gradual transition from humanitarian modalities of water management toward a long-term and government-led development approach is extremely needed.

From a general perspective, this chapter has tried to shed a light on the past, current, and future situation of South Sudan from the viewpoint of its natural resources, economy, and industry. It has then proceeded to highlight and delve into the most pressing issue the country is facing, meaning water scarcity and its management, before trying to frame which routes are being explored by both domestic and international institutions to solve such a delicate and intricately puzzle. As already seen in Chapter One in relation to the demographics of the country, South Sudan demonstrated an enormous untapped potential, which is nevertheless to this day still not backed by a systematic, concrete, and thorough legislative and governmental system, capable to make peremptory and respected decisions both on a national and a regional scale. The absence of normative actions has been reduced in the last ten years, but the lack of a functioning and capillary system of law application and enforcement still makes it possible for customary institutions and tribal heritage to determine which behavior should be maintained in front of crucial challenges and opportunities which South

¹²² Idris, I. (2017). *Local Governance in South Sudan: Overview*. The Institute of Development Studies and Partner Organizations. <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12413/14183>

Sudan is in no position to miss. In conclusion, serious action should be taken, even with the help of foreign investments and international organizations, in order to provide the country with a well-functioning, clear, and transparent system of rules, norms, and enforcement mechanisms. The challenges that natural resources management poses to South Sudan have a profoundly intertwined impact with the already present demographic changes and phenomena which the country is experiencing. Thus, a correct management of both elements may lead to an unprecedented rise in the condition of a young but already tormented country; on the other hand, mistakes could send an ever-burdened population on the brink of disaster, a position on which the South Sudanese people have been tethering on for a long time.

In order to complete the framework of interconnections, interplay, and continuous influence of one element on another, the final chapter of this analysis will delve into the extensive matter of conflict in South Sudan, a constantly evolving variable which has already encompassed internal criticalities, external interventions, and general tensions between tribes, populations, and nations. Only by understanding the underlying dynamics of conflict in the country, we will be able to finally determine the mechanisms through which demography, natural resources, and violence influence one another, determining the possible futures of South Sudan and the steps that should follow.

CHAPTER THREE: CONFLICT IN SOUTH SUDAN

Considering the present analysis up to this point, two of the three considered variables have been studied briefly but significantly. After determining which demographic phenomena and patterns South Sudan is experiencing and observing which trends are set to present in the near and further future, the main conclusions on the demographic opportunities of the country have been drawn.

Furthermore, the variable of natural resources availability and management has been taken in consideration, observing the current framework in South Sudan, the main economic repercussions, the most relevant criticalities and risks, and the future legislative and governmental steps that need to be followed in order to gain the potential advantages that such a delicate situation showcases. Moreover, some correlations have been depicted between demography and natural resources availability, in the attempt to forecast how the interplay between the two intertwined variables will unfold in the next decade.

Finally, this chapter will insert the last variable present in the analysis, trying to shed a light on the chronological experience of armed internal conflicts in South Sudan and to understand which underlying causes for the country's proneness to violence could be pointed out, referring to the most prominent narratives, views, and literary production.

3.1 CHRONOLOGICAL OVERVIEW OF CONFLICT IN SOUTH SUDAN

Notwithstanding the incredible recent birth of South Sudan as an independent and internationally recognized country, its history has always been riddled with conflict. Even though this analysis tries to concentrate on the historical period which started with the country's independence in 2011, it is pivotal to understand the underlying conflictual dynamics which have characterized even the precedent epoque, given that the long-term impact and repercussions are still present to this day, and they might have some reflections even in the near future.

3.1.1 The First Sudanese Civil War (1955-1972)

In order to remain in a relatively concise timespan, the history of conflict in South Sudan will hereby be studied starting from the first major internal one that South Sudan has endured: the First Sudanese Civil War (1955-1972). Naturally, the definition of such conflict as an internal one may raise some

doubts, but it can be ascribed as a civil war in the sense that, at the time, what is currently known as South Sudan was simply a province of Sudan and will eventually get detached several decades later.

The First Civil War in the Sudan is historically remembered as one of the more intractable conflicts in Africa, which has claimed roughly 500,000 to 1 million lives between 1955 and 1972¹²³. The conflict mainly took place in southern Sudan, at the time defined as the Bahr al-Ghazal, Upper Nile, and Equatoria provinces, which was distinguishable from the rest of the country on both ethnic and religious lines. As a matter of fact, whereas the northern part of Sudan was predominantly Muslim and Arabic-speaking, at least thirty different languages were spoken by people in the southern provinces, which also adhered to a plethora of religions, including Christianity, marking the enormous ethnic differences already mentioned in Chapter One. At the time of the outburst of the Civil War, the British Egyptian condominium favored the cultural characteristics of the southern provinces, given the suspicion and malevolence towards the possible expansion and influence of Islam in the country. Thus, many measures to preserve the qualities and characteristics of the south were approved; as an example, the southern provinces were closed to northerners, except for those on government business. Foreign traders were encouraged to set up business in the south, while northern traders were expelled. The Arabic language, northern styles of dress, and even Arabic names were discouraged or prohibited. Christian missionaries were encouraged, whilst Muslim proselytizing was banned. The original intent of the British government was to preserve and develop southern cultures, but the result of such a disqualifying and exclusive policy was inevitably inequality and mistrust between north and south. Southerners lagged behind northerners in education, economic development, and political experience, and thus Northerners tended to view the south as backward and uncivilized.

Shortly after a loosening of the British dominion, mistrust in the south increased when, in 1954, the newly elected Sudanese transitional government, dominated by northerners, began the process of “Sudanization” of the army, police, and administration¹²⁴. In this sense, most of the positions vacated by the exauthoritated British rule went to northerners out of 800 administrative posts which were Sudanized, only six went to southerners. Even in the Southern Corps, an armed military body meant to be entirely composed of southern troops, the higher ranks were filled by northerners as British army officers departed. Although the root of the problem was that there were few southerners qualified to fill higher ranks, southern soldiers tended to view it as another case of northern arrogance and discrimination by the northern government. By 1955, the situation had

¹²³ Welliver, T.K. (2023). *First Sudanese Civil War Erupts*. EBSCO.

¹²⁴ Concern Worldwide (2022). *Timeline: South Sudan's History at a Glance*.

become dangerously polarized: two southern members of the ruling cabinet were dismissed for disagreeing with the prime minister on southern affairs. At the same time, Southerners of all political stripes were attempting to form their own southern bloc in Parliament, invoking the institution of a federal constitution with some autonomy for the south. The government clumsily attempted to head this off, eventually arresting a southern member of the Parliament through an enormously influenced trial; immediately after, a crowd protesting the dismissal of three hundred southern workers at a cotton project was fired on by soldiers and police, resulting in eight casualties. The situation continued to worsen over the months, and in August governmental authorities uncovered a mutiny plot in the Southern Corps; as a result, the government airlifted northern troops into Juba, the capital of Equatoria, and civilians began to flee the city. Southern Troops soldiers started to refuse to obey their orders, gaining control of military bases and executing several northern officers¹²⁵.

With the arrival of one of the most prominent figures of the First Civil War, Lieutenant Renaldo Loleya, the violence from southerner mutineers started to skyrocket. Other garrisons of the Southern Corps in Equatoria soon joined in the mutiny, as did many police, civilians, and even some government officials. Northerners were attacked, and their property was looted, but in Bahr al-Ghazal and Upper Nile provinces authorities were able to disarm and calm the soldiers before full-scale mutiny could occur. When Prime Minister al-Azharī asked the mutineers to surrender and promised them fair treatment, they responded by asking that the northern troops be withdrawn from Juba, alongside calling for an intervention by Great Britain or the United Nations. Al-Azharī refused to remove his only loyal troops from the region and oppositely began to send more troops south. On the promise of fair treatment and immunity by the central government, the mutineers agreed to surrender, but when northern troops arrived in the areas to clear, they found the garrison deserted, except for Loleya and a few companions. The others had fled, fearing retribution from the northerners. Nevertheless, the government declared the disturbances to be over; the Southern Corps was disbanded and its place taken by northern forces.

In all, at least 261 northerners and 75 southerners were killed in the actual uprising, according to the commission of inquiry which followed¹²⁶. It would seem likely that many more people died in later reprisals by northern troops, as many reports of torture, mutilation, and summary execution by northern soldiers were released. Of those formally convicted for participating in the mutiny, 121 were executed, including Renaldo Loleya, even though it is alleged by southerners that several of these

¹²⁵ Alier, A. (1990). *Southern Sudan: Too Many Agreements Dishonored*. Oxford, England: Atlantic Highlands Press.

¹²⁶ AU Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan.

mutineers were put on trial posthumously, having already been summarily executed, and that the government was trying to cover its abuses of justice by announcing their trial and execution.

Notwithstanding the apparent end of such an extenuating conflict, the confrontation between the two counterparts was far from over. The State of Sudan celebrated its independence from the British Egyptian condominium on January 1, 1956, but the following years endured scattered incidents in the south, while Southern members of parliament continued to seek a political solution to the southern problem through some sort of federation, but without success.

The situation grew worse with the overthrow in 1958 of the elected government of the Sudan by Brigadier General Ibrahim Abboud, under which the tense situation in the south turned into an outright civil war. As a matter of fact, Abboud's policies toward the south differed from those of his predecessors: the basic assumption of northern leaders was that assimilation of the south into Arabic and Islamic culture would solve the problem, but the new leader took the policies in that sense much further. Many of the southern political leaders were arrested in 1960 and eventually chose exile. Abboud also sought to remove the influence of foreign Christian missionaries, who were regarded as the main source of the troubles: over the years, the Sunday holiday was abolished, and a number of priests were arrested. All religious gatherings outside churches were banned, and missionaries who left the country were prohibited from reentering. Subsequently, missionaries were required to apply for a license, and finally, in 1964, all foreign missionaries were expelled from the south, leading as a collateral effect to the closure of the majority of schools in the South.

Within this climate of terror, the first separatist and independentist movements of South Sudan were born on the example of the first ever independentist organization, the Sudan African National Union (SANU). Alongside these political and diplomatic attempts, an organized guerrilla movement, popularly known as Anya-nya¹²⁷, was forged in the south from the various remnants of the Southern Corps and others who had joined them. As the military campaign against the dictatorial government increased in strength, the government reacted more harshly, resulting in atrocities from both sides which mostly affected the civil population. Abboud was eventually overthrown in 1964, and the Sudan returned to civilian rule, but this did not stop the armed conflict. Hundreds of thousands of southerners fled to neighboring countries or to the north, as the violence escalated throughout the

¹²⁷ Rolandsen, H. (2011). *The Making of the Anya-Nya Insurgency in the Southern Sudan, 1961–64*. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5 (2): 211–232.

1960s. By the time armed conflict ended in stalemate in 1972, anywhere from 500,000 to 1 million people had been killed.

The end of the conflict was made possible by the diplomatic and military efforts provided by the two counterparts and foreign governments. The result of the peace operations was enshrined in a treaty, the Addis Ababa Agreement¹²⁸, which confirmed the formal establishment of the Southern Sudan Autonomous Region, granting a certain degree of autonomy to the southern population. However, this did not permanently resolve tensions between northern and southern Sudan, which will explode shortly after in the Second Sudanese Civil War.

3.1.2 The Second Sudanese Civil War (1983-2005)

After the conclusion of the First Sudanese Civil War, an extremely brief period of peace lasted only ten years, before the outbreak of yet another violent conflict between Sudan and the Southern Sudan Autonomous Region. At the start of 1982, Sudanese President Nimeiri established a referendum in the south to decide upon the decentralization issue, but it would have been limited to the Equatoria Province alone. Many southern politicians immediately interpreted this plan as an effort to divide the south, claiming that such action should have been considered in contrast with the 1972 Addis Ababa Agreement. Those who sustained such position were immediately arrested on charges of forming an illegal political organization, and a violent reaction by the Anya-nya separatist group sprout shortly after, targeting Sudanese police stations and army posts. The group was subsequently found to receive continuous help from southern army officers, which in fact took a formal contrasting position by igniting a rebellion, led by Major Carabino Kuanyin in the region of Bor. The Bor mutiny developed into a full-scale battle between northern and southern soldiers, de facto starting the Second Sudanese Civil War¹²⁹.

The already delicate situation worsened at the end of 1983, when the Islamic Law (Sharia) entered into effect in Sudan, resulting in numerous amendments in the penal code and prominent changes in the leadership of the country. Given the coexistence of numerous religious traditions in the region, the South strongly opposed such process of Islamization, which was nevertheless pushed by the central government. After some confirmed threats according to which the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) would overthrow Nimeiri and install a democratic socialist government,

¹²⁸ UN Peacemaker (1972). The Addis Ababa Agreement On The Problem Of South Sudan.

¹²⁹ Daly, M.W. (1993). *Civil War in the Sudan*. New York: British Academic Press.

followed by violent attacks resulting in more than 15.000 casualties, the Sudanese government proclaimed the state of emergency. Thus, the army and the police were granted extraordinary powers, allowing them to arrest and detain individuals, enter private premises, perform searches, and investigate personal mail. The state of emergency ended after some months, when President Nimeiri suspended Islamic courts and rescinded a decree to divide the south into three regions, and after almost a year of turmoil, conflict, and power shifts, Nimeiri was ousted in a bloodless coup.

In 1989, an Islamist-backed coup led to the overthrowing of democratically elected Prime Minister al-Mahdi by the hands of Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir, whose dictatorial regime led to the dissolution of the Parliament and the ban of political parties, among other repressive measures. Such unorthodox and cruel methods, paired with a strict Islamic fundamentalist policy and an increased international pressure (the United States and Egypt accused Sudan of supporting terrorist groups that were connected to the 1993 bombing of New York City's World Trade Center and a 1995 assassination attempt on Egyptian president Mubarak¹³⁰), led to a progressively more consistent foreign support granted to the SPLA, which translated in a shared desire to achieve the independence that the South had been longing for. Nevertheless, the unparalleled divisions in the region among the five major ethnic groups (Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Bari, and Azande) complicated efforts to unite against the North¹³¹. By 1998, the war had reached a stalemate in which neither side appeared capable of mounting a decisive military effort; Sudanese governmental forces conducted indiscriminate aerial bombardments and used helicopter gunships to attack insurgents, supply bases, and civilian targets in the South, while the latter was victim of the dictatorial regime of Garang.

In summation, the war turned southern Sudan into a large refugee camp. Millions of villagers had fled government attacks or had been forced to leave because of fighting between rebel factions; some of them spilled into the neighboring countries of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya, placing a severe strain on these nations. By 1985, at least one third of the Sudanese government's expenditures went toward the war in the south, while starvation spread in the south and continued to worsen during the course of the conflict. Finally, after years of carnage and protracted stalemate, the situation started to change in 1997, when the government of Sudan agreed to the realization of a plan for self-determination for the southern region. At the start of 2002, a tentative ceasefire agreement between

¹³⁰ O'Balance, E. (2000). *Sudan, Civil War, and Terrorism, 1956-1999*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

¹³¹ Idris, A.H. (2001). *Sudan's Civil War: Slavery, Race, and Formational Identities*. Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press.

the parties was negotiated under US mediation, although sporadic fighting continued for the first half of the year, while Garang and al-Bashir reached a final peace accord in 2005.

The 2005 peace accord marked the end of Africa's longest civil war and one of the most devastating wars in the continent's history. At the close of the conflict, more than two million Sudanese had been killed by combat, starvation, and disease while more than four million people were displaced. The peace agreement called for national elections within four years; the drafting of a new constitution within six years; the creation of a transitional, power-sharing government with Garang as vice president; and a north-south member ratio of seventy to thirty in a new national assembly. The agreement also stipulated a fifty-fifty split of oil profits between the north and the south, as mentioned in Chapter Two. The United Nations and the African Union both provided peacekeeping forces to ensure the correct development of the situation, but eventually fighting in the western Sudan region of Darfur that broke out in 2003 overshadowed this peace and led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people. Lasting hopes for peace in Sudan were complicated by the death of John Garang in a helicopter crash; as a matter of fact, his supporters, suspecting foul play, led violent riots that killed more than 130 people. At the beginning of the new millennium, southern Sudan remained one of the poorest areas in the world, unstable and deeply divided along ethnic lines and by tribal, political, and personal loyalties. Once the turmoil which followed Garang's death ceased, new peace accords were imagined and stipulated, and finally in January 2011 a referendum was held to determine whether or not South Sudan would become independent. The referendum ultimately passed, and South Sudan became an independent country in July 2011¹³², but this event did not put an end to the torment of conflict and factions which have characterized the short lifespan of South Sudan, this time under the form of an intestine civil war.

3.1.3 The South Sudanese Civil War (2013-2020)

After the obtainment of a far-longed, deeply troubled, and extremely desired independence from Sudan, the citizens of South Sudan were finally able to enjoy what appeared as a firm and concrete stoppage to the atrocities that the two Sudanese Civil Wars brought upon the civil population. As a matter of fact, once the dependence from Sudan was finally severed, South Sudan entered the international landscape as the youngest State in the world, with a thriving young population, untapped potential from both a demographic and a natural resources standpoint, and a generally protected

¹³² Gettleman, J. (2011). "After Years of Struggle, South Sudan Becomes a New Nation." The New York Times. www.nytimes.com/2011/07/10/world/africa/10sudan.html.

environment, given the attention that foreign powers and impactful nations had in the realization of the peace agreements between the two counterparts. Nevertheless, notwithstanding all these possibilities to undergo a peaceful and virtuous transition to an independent and well-functioning State, the situation of peace in South Sudan sunk only two years after the declaration of independence, igniting what is now known as the South Sudanese Civil War¹³³.

The tension within the country rapidly rose shortly after the first democratic elections ever held in the country, which saw the victory of President Salva Kiir, former Commander-in-Chief of the Sudan People's Liberation Army after the death of aforementioned John Garang. Kiir, an exponent of the Dinka community, had already been installed as the President of the Southern Autonomous Region, following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2005, and after the results of the independence referendum his role was formally consolidated as the first ever President of South Sudan. After his settlement, Kiir proposed himself as a reformer, keen on forgiving but not forgetting the injustices perpetrated by the Sudanese government in the previous decades, but his first years of government were characterized by internal disputes, especially regarding the leading core of the South Sudanese Government. In 2013, following a corruption scandal which involved two Ministers of the national government, Kiir condemned the alleged behavior, lifting the Ministers' immunity and issuing a suspension from their duty for the entire duration of the probe. The following instability in the leading forces pushed the president to adopt maneuvers aimed at reducing the size of his Cabinet, eventually resorting to the sacking of the entirety of the government members, including vice-president Riek Machar, a former member of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, eventually ejected by John Narang himself due to ideological divergences, and a member of the Nuer ethnic group.

The dismissal of Machar represented the true trigger of the South Sudanese Civil War, since the former vice-president interpreted the decision to drastically reduce the size of the government as a clear step towards dictatorship by President Kiir. As a consequence, Machar openly expressed his intention to challenge Salva Kiir's leadership, running as a competitor for the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO). Thus, the conflict was initially configured as a common struggle for power between two relevant political leaders, but the different ethnic belonging of the two figures caused an escalation of the tension, eventually leading to a renewed contrast between the two main ethnic longtime rivals in South Sudan. In fact, both sides eventually resorted to armed resources, configuring a fight between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM)

¹³³ Samms, A. (2018). *The South Sudanese Civil War*. Black Past.

and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO). The former, representative of the governmental armed forces and primarily composed of Dinka troops, started a series of violences against the non-Dinka population, focusing primarily on indiscriminate offences towards the Nuer group; furthermore, the South Sudanese government received economic and military support from Uganda, which resulted in an imbalance between the two parts at war. The violences of the SPLM reached the level of pogroms and massacres of Nuer civilians, resulting in the concretization of the infamous Nuer massacre¹³⁴: in a timespan of three days in December 2013, Dinka SPLA soldiers orchestrated a well-organized, intentional mass killing directed towards the Nuer population, which resulted in almost 50.000 deaths. The Nuer massacre sparked a wave of widespread anger and discontent towards the government, leading to an increase in the attention of the international community in respect to the situation. The brutal actions perpetrated by the SPLM, backed by Kiir's government, were classified as ethnic cleansing and genocide by the majority of the major international players, leading to an immediate action towards a peaceful resolution.

In 2014, the first ceasefire agreement was reached, especially due to the intervention of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union, the United Nations (through the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, UNMISS), China, the European Union, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway. More than 7.500 UN troops were deployed on South Sudanese soil with the objective to maintain a situation of peace, and the negotiations reached a concrete result with the signing of the Compromise Peace Agreement¹³⁵ in 2015. Such accord primarily established the reinstatement of Machar as vice-president of South Sudan and his return in the capital, Juba, but the underlying tensions in the aftermath of the decision led to a second breakout of fighting in the region, with the second ouster of Machar from his governmental duties and his replacement with Taban Deng Gai, a faithful ally of the Kiir government.

This second phase of the South Sudanese Civil War also involved a territorial spread, since the SPLM-IO fled to the surrounding (and previously peaceful) region of Equatoria. Thus, the scale of the conflict started to enlarge, with rebel in-fighting surging as a major part of the conflict. By April 2018, an estimate of 400.000 citizens was killed in the Civil War, with more than 40.000 victims being children. Furthermore, more than 4 million people have been displaced, both internally and to neighboring countries, primarily Uganda and Sudan, even though the most pressing backlash

¹³⁴ Human Rights Watch (2014). South Sudan: Ethnic Targeting, Widespread Killings.

¹³⁵ IGAD South Sudan Office (2015). *Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan*. <https://southsudan.igad.int/index.php/about-us/91-demo-contents/news/299-agreement-on-the-resolution-of-the-conflict-in-the-republic-of-south-sudan>.

revolved around the agricultural crisis which invested the heartland in the south of the country. The continuous fighting and devastation led to a declaration of famine¹³⁶ in February 2017, which involved 100.000 people already facing starvation and more than 1 million citizens classified as being on the brink of famine, mainly in the Unity State. The emergency of malnutrition, paired with the widespread fighting, displacement, poor access to health services, drought, and low coverage of sanitation facilities, led to a worsening situation of discomfort, hunger, and famine which invested half of the South Sudanese population¹³⁷, which deflated into severe food insecurity at the end of the same year.

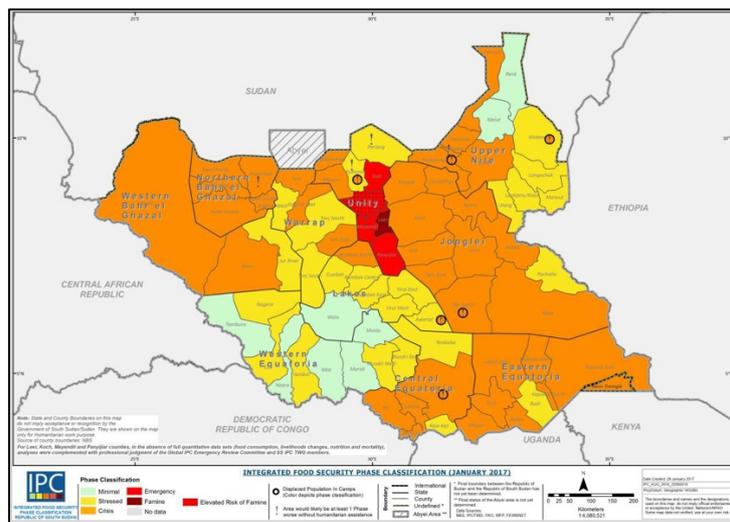


Figure 3.1 (Food Security in South Sudan, United Nations Classification, 2017)

In order to contrast the rampaging violences perpetrated by the SPLM, nine opposition groups (which excluded the SPLM-IO) decided to join forces, constituting the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA) with the purpose to collectively negotiate with the Kiir government. Furthermore, international pressure on Juba was increased when the United States passed an arms embargo on South Sudan in July 2018 through the UN Security Council; additionally, with neighboring Sudan facing economic troubles and relying on revenue from transporting oil from South Sudan, the Sudanese government, through a combination of incentives and coercion, convinced President Kiir and the SPLA-IO to hold talks in Khartoum. Finally, in June 2018, another conclusive ceasefire was signed (the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan), with the shared agreement to form a transitional government for the three years leading to national elections, to let African Union and IGAD peacekeepers deploy in South Sudan and to implement formal and

¹³⁶ UNICEF (2017). Famine hits parts of South Sudan.

¹³⁷ See Figure 3.1

definitive State boundaries, drawn by an impartial and external commission. Notwithstanding the peaceful intentions, the ceasefire was violated only hours after coming into effect, when pro-governmental forces resorted to armed violence against rebels. Moreover, the decision by the South Sudanese Parliament to extend President Kiir's term by three more years sparked a series of general protests by the SPLM-IO, but the two counterparts eventually agreed to share power in the so-called Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity. According to the scheme, Machar would have been instated as one of five vice-presidents, and the Parliament seats would have been redistributed with a more proportionate majority in favor of President Kiir's party. Following this diplomatic decision, in September 2018 Kiir signed a peace deal with Machar, formally determining the end of the South Sudanese Civil War¹³⁸.

Celebrations were held in Juba, surrounded by deep criticisms towards the fact that the peace deal failed to address the true underlying issues of the conflict, mainly identified with the excessive concentration of powers in the hands of the President, and that the status quo would continue to produce violence. Once the new government was formalized and Machar was reinstated as vice-president in 2020, violence started to spread once again. Opposition members referred to attacks perpetrated by the SPLM-IO in the states of Equatoria and Upper Nile, eventually leading to the formation of yet another organized rebel armed group, the United South Sudanese Opposition Movements (SSOMA). The international community immediately began diplomatic efforts to tame the potentially violent confrontation, and disarmament campaigns led by the government officially started between 2020 and 2021. Notwithstanding the steps towards peace and equilibrium, the latest developments of the situation still depict a scenario of instability and fear for a resumption of violence, which still torments the South Sudanese population.

3.1.4 Contemporary Developments and Current Situation (2020-Today)

After having understood the dynamics of conflict which have characterized South Sudan as a country since the half of the 20th century, it is now possible to frame the current situation, trying to understand the long-lasting impact that decades of war have produced on a rapidly changing society such as the South Sudanese one. In fact, notwithstanding the strict control under which the country has been put by external actors, the interplay between weak governments, ethnic differences, internal discrepancies, and a resourceful economy still produce to this day a potentially explosive situation, which needs to be constantly monitored in order to prevent the outburst of future conflicts, both on

¹³⁸ Global Conflict Tracker (2025). *Instability in South Sudan*. Center of Preventive Action.

the internal and on the international scale, which could endanger and curtail the country's potential and its future advantages.

If we observe the situation of conflict in South Sudan in the last five years, it is possible to understand that a situation of proneness to contrast still persists in the country, notwithstanding both a far and near past spangled of violence, brutality, and misery. Since the formal end of the civil war in 2020, increasing intercommunal violence and attacks, the threat of the peace process unraveling, and dire humanitarian conditions across large areas of South Sudan have placed renewed urgency on improving security and meeting basic protection needs for South Sudan's civilians. In August 2021, the underlying tension started to thrive, when former vice-president Machar was deposed as head of the SPLM-IO, resulting in minor clashes between forces loyal to Machar and the new fringes of the Movement. After years of apparent silence, the situation started to worsen once again in April 2023, when fighting erupted in neighboring Sudan, resulting in an exodus of refugees, including many South Sudanese, fleeing southward to South Sudan. Given the long-lasting effects of the Civil War on the South Sudanese infrastructure, the situation immediately turned violent, since clashes and hunger have afflicted already overcrowded camps, and the government and aid organizations lack the resources to meet incredibly pressing humanitarian needs. In 2023, more than 7.7 million people, or two-thirds of the entire South Sudanese population, faced severe food insecurity, registering the worst hunger crisis the country has ever faced.

Years after President Kiir and former opposition leader Machar formed the unity government in 2020, there has been slow progress in the implementation of the 2018 peace agreement, initially scheduled for February 2023. Notwithstanding the extreme urgency, many issues remain unaddressed to this day, including security arrangements, institutional reforms, and electoral preparations. Although the unity government remains intact on paper, security sector reforms have languished, as skeptical parties have no trust in each other and prefer to hold back in anticipation of a possible return to fighting. Furthermore, long-delayed national elections, originally scheduled for December 2024, have been postponed to 2026, and President Kiir has already declared his intention to run in what he claims will be a free and fair race. However, a persistent rift between Kiir and Machar, the leaders of the largest civil war factions, has raised fears that violence could still flare up in the lead-up to elections. Meanwhile, an armed insurgency in the south of the country, led by the National Salvation Front (NSF), poses a severe threat to civilians and further endangers the peace process¹³⁹.

¹³⁹ Boswell, A. (2021). *Conflict and Crisis in South Sudan's Equatoria*. United States Institute for Peace.

Political tension and violence have significantly escalated since the beginning of 2025, jeopardizing South Sudan's peace process and political transition. Clashes between the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (SSPDF), the state's new official military force, and the SPLM-IO, were first reported in January in Western Equatoria State, but have since intensified. In February, intense fighting erupted between the SSPDF and an armed youth offshoot of the White Army (a militia affiliated with the SPLM-IO) in the Upper Nile State, which resulted in airstrikes in response to what it claimed was a large-scale offensive mounted by the White Army and the SPLM-IO. Over the months, the crisis has only worsened: on March 4, the rebel militia overran an army base in Nasir, a major town near the Ethiopian border in Upper Nile. Several opposition leaders and allies of vice-president Machar were arrested the following day, and Machar's house was surrounded by army forces, effectively placing him under house arrest on the alleged accuse of being plotting a rebellion to overthrow the status quo and substitute President Kiir in his leadership role. Machar's detention, alongside escalating clashes between government troops and rebel militias, has immediately reinstated fears of a return to civil war within the civil population, still living the long-lasting effects of the last ten years¹⁴⁰. The South Sudanese government initially confirmed the detention of the former vice-president, but in a second moment all the accusations were denied, jeopardizing any chance of transparency and curtailing foreign efforts to a diplomatic solution to the issue. In response to such growingly odd situation, both the United Nations and regional bodies have stated that South Sudan is at risk of widespread conflict, with international diplomats urging restraint.

As President Kiir's control over key political figures slowly weakens, the government's position looks increasingly fragile. South Sudan has already faced a fiscal crisis since 2024 when fighting in neighboring Sudan burst a critical pipeline used to export oil and cut nearly two-thirds of the state's revenue, and the impact of continuous and resumed fighting in Sudan could continue to spill over into South Sudan, with the Sudanese army particularly interested in establishing itself once again in the Upper Nile region.

In conclusion, notwithstanding the numerous attempts aimed at obtaining a situation of balance and peace, South Sudan is still living on the verge of yet another outburst of civil war. In order to avoid such potentially devastating outcome to present itself, both the governmental actors in the country and the international community shall prioritize the complete and thorough application of what is provided by the 2018 peace agreement, whose goals have been desired for a long time. Nevertheless, since the signatory parties have repeatedly demonstrated to be unable to implement the

¹⁴⁰ Adegoke, Y., Mandil, N. (2025). Why fears are growing of a return of civil war to South Sudan. BBC News.

agreement's provision, it is pivotal for another actor to step in and fill this power vacuum. With the entire peace process held hostage and key signatories of the peace agreement sidelined, this narrow path forward can only be concluded with the strong and stable support of and pressure from the international community, which is growing progressively more interested to the potential economic, social, and commercial repercussions of such a complex scenario.

In the following paragraphs, we will try to understand the underlying causes of the proneness to conflict that South Sudan has repeatedly shown to maintain, alongside the determination of the interconnections between demographic factors, natural resources availability, and the exacerbation of conflict in the country. Through the application and study of both quantitative and qualitative elements, it should be possible to also delineate eventual future outlooks, framing a model which could forecast the potential impact that the aforementioned variables respectfully have. Before delving into a thorough analysis, though, it is pivotal to find an answer to the most pressing question on the matter: why is South Sudan prone to conflict?

According to the most prominent narratives¹⁴¹, there are four main circumstances which could represent the igniting factor of South Sudan's conflict proneness: its demographic development, the availability of oil and other natural resources and the consequent fight for their utilization, the excessive availability of arms, and the behavior of external actors, with the latter being heavily linked with one another. The goal of the remainder of this chapter is to determine which of these alleged underlying causes is rationally and data-wise more precise, with the aid of both quantitative and qualitative data, and the study of political, social, and stability indicators.

3.2 THE DEMOGRAPHIC CAUSE

At the very beginning of the present analysis, the first considered factor in the determination of South Sudan's historical, recent, and possibly future struggle has been the demographic patterns that the country is currently undergoing, common to many states of the area of the Horn of Africa, but with some peculiarities typical of South Sudan. The observations have shown that South Sudan is undergoing a particular demographic process which could eventually lead to the possibility of gaining the Demographic Dividend¹⁴², but the fact that the country is still on the verge of entering the Demographic Window of Opportunity means that, if the already established precondition for its

¹⁴¹ Nyadera, I.N. (2020). South Sudan conflict from 2013 to 2018: Rethinking the causes, situation and Solutions.

¹⁴² See Chapter One.

obtainment are not met, the country risks to slip in the downside of having a population structured in this way.

If we intend demography as a potential reason for the outbreak and the development of armed conflict, there are several main streams that need to be considered, but only a few of them seem to fit and be applicable to the case of South Sudan. As a matter of fact, several studies point out that demographic change can represent the reason for violent conflict, especially considering determinate patterns which, in some specific circumstances, could result in contrast. According to Jack Goldstone's perspective¹⁴³, a number of specific population changes appear to be generally strongly associated with increased risks of political violence: 1) An expanding agrarian population running up against land that is controlled or being expanded for exclusive use of large landlords; 2) An expanding urban population in an economy that is not providing commensurate economic growth; 3) An expanding population of higher-educated youth facing limited opportunities to obtain elite political and economic positions; 4) A large youth bulge; that is, an expansion of the 15 to 25 age cohort relative to the overall adult population of a society, especially where political institutions are weak; 5) The migration of populations into regions already settled by a population with a distinct ethnic or political identity. Naturally, other potential causes of violent confrontation are considered in Goldstone's work, but this paragraph will be limited to strictly demographic considerations. Already with this brief list of potential motives, some interesting considerations can be inferred; in general, demographic change could represent a reason for violent conflict for a plethora of reasons, but the intrinsic characteristics of a country, a region, or a society must be compliant with the degeneration of such demographic evolution, in order to eventually result in conflict. Thus, in the specific case of South Sudan, it appears that two of the aforementioned reasons could be useful to explain the country's proneness to civil war, tensions, and general contrast: ethnic rivalries and the youth bulge.

3.2.1 Ethnic Rivalries as a Driver of Conflict

Ethnicity as a concept could be intended as a social phenomenon that describes "the condition of belonging to an ethnic group, the sense of ethnic identity felt by members of an ethnic community"¹⁴⁴. The term ethnicity has featured prominently in conflict literature and discourse, and it assumes an enormously enhanced value as it relates to Africa. As a matter of fact, given that numerous African

¹⁴³ Goldstone, J. (2002). *Population and Security: How Demographic Change Can Lead to Violent Conflict*. Journal of International Affairs, vol. 56, no. 1. The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York.

¹⁴⁴ Solomon, Hussein, Matthews (2001). *Transforming Ethnic Conflicts*. Pretoria: Centre for International Political Studies, University of Pretoria, p. 2.

countries are multiethnic, political instability and violent and prolonged social conflicts in more than half of Africa's conflict societies are believed to be largely rooted in ethnic cleavages, disharmony and inequalities. In the majority of differentiated countries, inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relationships are often a source of problems, given that they open a series of scenarios of incompatible interests, inequitable access to political space, economic and other opportunities, and intergroup identity competition. Furthermore, they can also be accompanied by bigotry and conflict, which can quickly and probably escalate into civil wars. On African soil, conflicts in countries such as Rwanda, Kenya, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan, for example, have predominantly been presented as revolving around competing opinions of ethnic identity, translated and manifested in political, economic and sociocultural inequalities. As a result, these conflicts have profoundly impacted political choices and inclinations, perceptions of prospects for economic and social development and security, and a sense of respect for the human rights of individuals and groups¹⁴⁵.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned fact that more than sixty different ethnic groups can be identified in the population of South Sudan, the most important and rooted inter-ethnic rivalries are limited to the major ethnic groups of the Dinka and the Nuer, as seen in the previous paragraphs, and, to a lesser degree, the Murle. In South Sudan, intercommunal conflicts between the Dinka and the Nuer on the one hand, and the Nuer and the Murle on the other, pre-date Sudan's independence in 1956¹⁴⁶. The divergent views and approaches of the Nuer and Dinka, which dominated the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) during the second Sudan Civil War, also provide a reference point for South Sudan's present-day ethnic disagreements. As already briefly anticipated, the SPLM struggle against the Khartoum government for the liberation of the then-southern Sudan region was clouded by two opposing visions: the Dinka advocated for a united Sudan where all Sudanese are liberated and treated as equal citizens, whereas the Nuer's vision of liberation was tantamount to an independent South Sudan. As a result, the divergence of visions within SPLM on southern Sudan's future translated into latent divisions in the ranks of the South Sudan liberation movement¹⁴⁷. From 1991 to 1995, these disagreements led to widespread unrest between the fragmented groups of the Dinka and Nuer populations, as well as attacks and counterattacks against villages and communities of the two opposed ethnic groups within South Sudan. It further generated the "conflict of ethnic politics" that led to the intensification of inter-ethnic clashes which, due to the increased targeting of women and children, was described as one of the worst and bloodiest conflicts in the history of

¹⁴⁵ Shulika, L.S., Okeke-Uzodike, N. (2013). *Inter-Ethnic Conflict In South Sudan: A Challenge To Peace*.

¹⁴⁶ LeRiche, M., Arnold, M. (2012). *South Sudan: From Revolution to Independence*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 16–17.

¹⁴⁷ Carment, D., James, P. (2000). *Explaining Third-party Intervention in Ethnic Conflict: Theory and Evidence*. *Nations and Nationalism*, 6 (2), pp. 173–202.

southern Sudan. These long-drawn ethnic differences not only disrupted social, economic and political relations between the southern Sudan communities in pre-independence South Sudan but have continued to sow seeds of dissonance between and among local ethnic communities, despite the country's new sovereign political status.

In many post-conflict situations, elites have drawn on the political capital of their ethnic affiliations and loyalties to encounter political and governance challenges¹⁴⁸. According to several scholars, ethnic divisions and mobilization along new politically based identities is a feature of transitional societies, where human and civil populations are able to respond to changes in political power. Thus, when states are faced with the relatively important and daunting responsibilities of political and economic liberalization and development, ethnic resentment can be nurtured and ethnic animosity further influenced by institutional, political and international decision-making and relations. In South Sudan, ethnic discord remains among the major challenges impacting on the effectiveness of the country's transformation and peacebuilding efforts. High levels of poverty, the relatively high dependence on oil resources as a main source of revenue, and the limited political and economic opportunities accessible to the many but small ethnic groups, play a crucial role in fueling ethnic tensions in the country. The current situation could easily evolve into widespread violent conflicts with the undesirable consequences of severe societal disintegration, which will hamper investment, economic prosperity and welfare; increase public and political corruption; cause political instability; and, in the worst-case scenario, descend into yet another civil war.

Considering the contemporary situation that South Sudan sits on, addressing and resolving internal conflicts and disagreements, with the aim of establishing stable peace, represent the central building blocks to the achievement of the country's desired level of development and peacebuilding objectives: According to UNHCR detections, South Sudan is faced with major political and socio-economic challenges, which continue to be exacerbated by intercommunal animosity, insurgency by rebel groups and localized conflicts over land and natural resources. The manifestation of ethnic antagonism with regard to state politics and political power in South Sudan is predominant in the intra-ethnic rivalry between the Dinka Bahr el Ghazal and Dinka Bor, and the inter-ethnic competition between the Dinka and Nuer ethnic groups, wherein the Nuer contest the domination of political and economic space by the Dinka. These inter-ethnic conflicts are perpetuated on the premise that the priorities of central and state governments are primarily centered on privileging and promoting the

¹⁴⁸ Jalali, R., Lipset, S.M. (1993). *Racial and Ethnic Conflicts: A Global Perspective*. Political Science Quarterly, 107(4), pp. 585–606.

interests of former and present SPLM members and its military wing, organizations that heavily draw their membership from the Dinka to the exclusion of other ethnic groups. In addition, a report of a focus group interview conducted by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs¹⁴⁹ highlighted that such centralization and monopoly of power is the result of power imbalances and domination in South Sudan. These imbalances have resulted in the absence of efficient and transparent public administration and financial management systems. Many have also identified inequalities as the cause of corruption, discrimination, tribal conflict, unfair government employment practices and the marginalization exclusion of smaller ethnic groups from state politics, and the de facto denial of these minority ethnic groups of the legitimate right to share the gains of independent South Sudan. The inability of the elite to equitably include all South Sudanese in the sharing of independence dividends is believed to have fueled the formation of recently born new rebel groups, such as the South Sudan Liberation Army (SSLA), South Sudan Democratic Movement/Army (SSDM/A) and the National United Front (NUF), among others. These groups have been responsible for numerous attacks in parts of Unity State, which produces a third of South Sudan's total oil output.

Another relevant and aforementioned dimension of ethnic conflict in South Sudan centers on issues of cattle raids and grazing land, mostly between the Murle and Nuer, as well as between the Nuer and Dinka. These ethnic clashes, which symbology and importance have already been treated in Chapter Two, have dominated divisions between the two groups long before the outbreak of the Sudan Civil Wars, and are a major source of instability, especially in Jonglei State. Since South Sudan's independence, the internecine conflicts between the ethnic groups have continued to spread and intensify, with progressively more severe consequences. The United Nations Mission in South Sudan registered and reported on the escalating inter-ethnic clashes between the Nuer and Murle, and the Murle and the Dinka, between December 2011 and January 2012. In this period, some 6.000-to-8.000-armed Nuer youth combatants carried out more than twenty-one attacks in the Pibor district (home to the Murle ethnic group), in brazen reprisals for earlier attacks and cattle raids by Murle fighters on Nuer districts. In the following months, a small group of young Murle militants retaliated by staging 44 attacks on Nuer and Dinka Bo villages. As South Sudan celebrated the anniversary of its independence in 2012 and 2013, reports of ethnic dissension and the threat of renewed intercommunal conflicts have been unsettling¹⁵⁰. The outcomes of these potential clashes could be incalculable in terms of devastating long-term consequences for affected communities. In the past,

¹⁴⁹ Cook, T.D. (2011). Building A Nation: South Sudanese Share Their Thoughts On The Creation Of A Successful State. National Democratic Institute for International Affairs.

¹⁵⁰ United Nations Mission in South Sudan (2012). *Incidents of Inter-communal Violence in Jonglei State*. UNMISS Geographical Information System.

clashes resulted in the burning down of villages, looting and destruction of private and public property, cattle raiding and slaughtering, massive extermination and abduction of people, especially children, and a surge in the number of internally displaced persons and refugees seeking asylum in neighboring states and border countries. The upsurge of ethnic tensions in South Sudan has led to the increased use and possession of small firearms, especially by the youth, who feel they were not afforded equitable opportunities to access services normally provided by the state, such as security and the rule of law, as will be dealt in the following paragraph.

In conclusion, ethnic diversity is a multifaceted natural feature that characterizes nations across the globe. Multi-ethnic national composition is a challenge, but countries that embrace diversity and enlist its virtues repeatedly proved to thrive. Ethnicity has challenged post-Cold War Africa more than any other continent, and South Sudan does not represent an exception. When internal ethnic divisions and conflicts prevail among communities and uncertainty rules, the core of sustainable peace and stability is seriously challenged. This state of affairs, which engenders social, political and economic grievances, hassled to entrenched insecurity, as manifested in the ongoing ethnic conflicts within and between the various South Sudanese communities over resources, power-sharing, land and livestock. As a late comer to the pitfalls of mismanaging multi-ethnic societies, South Sudan has the opportunity to learn from the failed experiences of other countries in Africa and beyond, such as the DRC, Rwanda, Burundi and Syria. This places South Sudan in a better position to chart strategies and adopt promising reforms that will open up equitable political and economic space to South Sudanese, irrespective of their ethnic affiliations. Thus, as part of the conflict resolution and management strategy, the Government of South Sudan and its stakeholders should engage conflict parties and communities in comprehensive interactive dialogues and problem-solving processes on land reform and management policies. Furthermore, unlike other multi-ethnic countries, South Sudan's situation of ethnic disharmonies is complicated by many other challenges, including unresolved issues with Sudan and general problems with external intervention. Nonetheless, failure to recognize the impending danger that ethnic disharmony constitutes is not a choice, as the consequences are too grave for the future of youngest country in the world. The prevailing ethnic discord, the sporadic but deeply disruptive ethnic-based conflicts with the attendant loss of human lives and property, the disillusionment of youth and their strengthening sense of ethnic affiliation, the stagnating economy, and the fact that today's South Sudan youth never had the opportunity to know and experience peace, remain some of the serious concerns in South Sudan's peace efforts.

These factors, combined together, dictate that tackling ethnic conflict should be accorded the highest priority, in order to build national cohesion and put South Sudan on the path of sustainable peace, stability and prosperity. This noble goal is achievable if the South Sudanese embrace their diversity to solidify national unity. This could be possible by enlisting the influence and power of all ethnic leaders to mobilise their supporters to collaborate in sustained inter-ethnic cooperation. South Sudan's ethnic diversity is an asset that should be capitalized upon to help the country conquer its current challenges. The dividends of sovereign South Sudan should trickle down to the entire population, cultivating confidence in the emerging state's national character and perpetuating collaboration among the populace. The sense of belonging to a nation that cares for its citizens would not be limited to ethnic leaders but would permeate the entire society, creating a sense of obligation and reciprocation of the ruling parties to cooperate with the traditional leaders, as well as unleash a self-perpetuating cycle of mutual trust that would strengthen internal cohesion. The tools for building a cohesive nation-state are to be found in a blend of modern techniques and in the traditional conflict resolution mechanisms inherited through generations of various ethnic groups. By espousing its traditional institutions, South Sudan can establish a solid political, economic and social infrastructure in an integrated traditional framework of conflict resolution mechanisms, and participatory and inclusive approaches to building state institutions and accelerating modernization. Programs should be established that support revolutionary and innovative policies for good governance and create a viable political framework that seeks to end ethnic conflict and paves the way for economic development. From an international viewpoint, there seems to be an attitude of treating South Sudan not as an independent country, but as an amalgamation of ethnic groups with the dominant groups having their way. This is evident from the manner in which the peace agreements have been handled, so that there can only be a cease-fire when the dominant tribes are satisfied with the positions its members have been awarded. Despite several peace agreements being signed, there are still weak support systems. The institutional bodies established to ensure smooth implementation of the peace agreements have often fallen short of their mandate due to operational and institutional challenges that hinder them from operating efficiently. Furthermore, there seems to be an absence of a serious commitment to end the everlasting internal conflict. Despite the devastating consequences of the South Sudan conflict, political leaders have failed to show goodwill to end the crisis; the main antagonists in the conflict bear political and moral responsibility to ensure that the life and dignity of the people of South Sudan are defended. On this however, they have failed. This extends to the regional and international actors involved in the peace process. The August 2018 peace agreement supported by IGAD has seen some of the countries lacking neutrality. Uganda and Sudan are said to be aligned with the interests of the government and opposition, respectively, while Ethiopia and

Kenya are involved in diplomatic and economic rivalry which may play out in the peace process. Complex military-politics relations in South Sudan are also visible and cause a hindrance to peace: there have been strong affiliations between soldiers and political elites, specifically from their ethnic groups, to whom they seem to pay more allegiance than to the state.

In summation, sustainable peace in South Sudan cannot be realized until key factors are addressed. These include an inadequate sense of nationalism due to the presence of ethnic identities stronger than national identity, a lack of strong institutions to ensure full implementation of peace agreements, the absence of neutral security forces that do not take sides in the conflict; and a vacuum of political will to achieve peace. South Sudan's challenges are huge, and the required efforts are enormous, but the strategic benefits that these efforts can bring to South Sudan's current and future generations are definitely worth the struggle.

3.2.2 Youth Bulge and Conflict

As anticipated, the second demographic reason which could explain South Sudan's proneness to conflict is the presence in the country of a Youth Bulge, a concept already explained in its characteristics in Chapter One. As already stated, according to numerous theories and conceptualizations, the risks for a young country that a consistent Youth Bulge could provoke in terms of security and safety from armed conflict are present and well determined, thus providing a possibly successful explanation of South Sudan's behavior with respect to internal conflict. In the observation of the country's demographics¹⁵¹, it has already been stated that South Sudan is an extremely young country, with a median age of 18.7 years and a consistent cluster of individuals within the cohort 15-29 years of age. Furthermore, the most prominent works on the potential risks that a Youth Bulge could provoke within a country with specific characteristics have been nominated. Thus, the aim of this paragraph is to determine in a more precise way the behavior of the South Sudanese youth, the underlying causes of their actions, and the implications that such patterns bestow upon the country's security.

From a more general standpoint, it is safe to assert that the role of young individuals in occasions of conflict, alongside their potential within post-conflict recovery, is extremely important. As a matter of fact, in a rational and ideal course of action, providing for the young ex-combatants the educational, vocational and other social needs, thus enabling them to gain skills and competences

¹⁵¹ See Chapter One.

that facilitate their economic and social integration, such individuals may be brought to a point where they find the alternative of returning to combat unattractive. In meeting the needs of the youths, it is pivotal not to homogenize them as either security threats or passive victims needing special sympathy, but as complex and heterogeneous individuals with peculiar skills, aspirations, and limitations. In scenarios of both war and peace, the youth could contribute through a variety of ways; during peaceful periods, young individuals represent the reservoir of a country's energy to endure its present challenges and face the future ones, thus forming the basis for the continuous reproduction and the productive potential of a society. On the other hand, young people provide the mainstay of the fighting personnel in any nation during times of war. In many countries (especially African ones), the plague of child soldiers¹⁵² is present and established, since children are abducted and forced to join military groups due to poverty, lack of food, need for power and protections, and lack of opportunities for vocational training and education. Moreover, in these environments children are often exposed to drugs, sexual abuse, terror, and violence used to harden them, turning them to inhuman killing machines¹⁵³. Notwithstanding these unfortunately common spiteful scenarios, it is also key not to stigmatize young people as most of the Youth Bulge literature does, since in general the majority of young people do not get involved in violence, and instead can provide a positive contribution to peacebuilding and development. In fact, there are multiple motivations for youth engagement in armed violence, but these need to be understood in relation to each particular context, given that there may be considerable variation in the motivations of individual youth within any given context.

In the specific context of South Sudan, the presence of such a consistent Youth Bulge, alongside structural challenges which curtail their possibility of educational and professional development, career, and political representation, provide a mix of characteristics which, in reality, account for a potential risk to the country's safety. Moreover, even the extremely strong sentiment of belonging to a specific ethnic group, which could resemble a familiar tie, enhances dynamics which, in turn, suggest a potential explanation of violent behavior by the South Sudanese youth. As a matter of fact, youth have been key actors in the conflict and violence in South Sudan, especially through the contexts of cattle raiding, militias, and urban gangs.

As anticipated in Chapter Two, the practice of cattle raiding in South Sudan has deeply rooted traditional origins, but in the latest years its dynamics have changed both in scope and magnitude,

¹⁵² According to Save The Children, "any boy or girl under age 18 who is recruited or used by an armed force or armed group in any capacity".

¹⁵³ Njeru, S. (2010). Dealing With the Past: the Youth and Post-War Recovery in southern Sudan. *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, 10(3).

becoming increasingly more violent, deadly, and destructive, due to the increased availability of small arms and the ignition of revenge attacks and endless cycles of violence. In this sense, both cattle-keepers and young individuals involved in the practice are becoming increasingly militarized and easily mobilized to partake in ongoing conflicts. As a result, livestock resources, which should function as suppliers of household food and social security, have become liabilities for which communities are killed, maimed and robbed of their assets. The choice for young people to engage in cattle raiding and counter-cattle raiding violence has been strongly attributed to the absence of any form of security, as a mode of socialization, or as a livelihood strategy. In fact, accumulation of cattle wealth does represent an important incentive for youngsters' continued engagement in violence; since participants in raids and attacks receive a good share of loot, some youths have accumulated important amounts of cattle wealth, at the expenses of elders and cattle-keepers.

The second fundamental stream of youth violence in South Sudan is represented by affiliation with militias and urban gangs. In situations of post-conflict societies in Africa, part of the landscape includes refugee camps, temporary settlements for IDPs and protected villages. These are sites of particular disenfranchisement for young men, who are unable in such environments to fulfil most of the internal and external expectations of manhood held by their societies. In response to this situation, one of the prime coping mechanisms is joining gangs. As a matter of fact, boys and young people coalesce together as a social group, choosing a particular type of moral code in order to connect to a wider global culture, thus engaging in violent and criminal activity. These gangs and groups represent both social and economic communities, which provide members with a sense of belonging, identity, protection, and support¹⁵⁴. In militarized societies where masculinity and status are in great part proven through one's ability to protect the community and provide for the family and household, young people and the ones outside are exposed and attracted to different types of violence.

Notwithstanding the modalities through which young South Sudanese express their disruptive violence, it is pivotal to understand the social dynamics and motivations which bring such individuals to resort to conflict, affiliation with gangs, and generally despicable acts. As a matter of fact, there is wide literature exploring the motivations behind youth participation in violence and livelihood decisions more generally, which has relevant analysis for understanding the particular situation of South Sudan. According to the most relevant studies¹⁵⁵, the most common methods through which youth violence is experienced include recruitment, indoctrination into groups, gender inequalities and

¹⁵⁴ Danish Refugee Council (2017): p.15.

¹⁵⁵ Hilker, L., Fraser, E. (2009). *Youth exclusion, violence, conflict and fragile states*. Social Development Direct.

socialization, identity politics and ideology, charismatic leadership and organizational dynamics, and further trigger events. It is possible to also provide some clarification to this brief list, alongside other relevant dynamics: youth violence might be ignited by the aforementioned Youth Bulge (young people fight because they are too many), coercion (young people fight because they are forced either by physical abduction or because of a lack of alternatives for survival), a youth crisis (either a societal crisis mainly impactful on the youth, resulting in a feeling of uneasiness with respect to social changes and constraints, or a crisis originating from the youth and impacting on society at large), lack of educational opportunities, lack of employment opportunities, and finally exclusion from political participation and decision-making structures¹⁵⁶.

Within the sphere of social norms contributing to the expansion of violence, it has been argued that during times of conflict youth experience a process of asocialisation into a polarized existence of hostility and are thus denied the normal cultural, moral and value socialization conventionally gained from family and community structures. In the South Sudanese case, the collapse of customary socioeconomic systems during the civil wars has created a profound decision-making vacuum, reducing the possibilities of addressing issues in a non-violent manner. The choice to respond violently to any perceived threat has consequently become a common occurrence, and youth therefore become the custodians of security, expressed through violent outputs¹⁵⁷. Providing a concrete example, thousands of women have been abducted in Jonglei state in retaliatory attacks in the conflict between the Lou Nuer and Murle communities since 2009. In this sense, killing and violence aimed at women in the conflict by male cattle-camp youth has increased to a point where it could be said to have become a normalized practice, where women are considered legitimate spoils of war, along with livestock and other chattel. Thus, abductions, sexual slavery, and sexual violence in intestine conflicts are not just a by-product of the violence, but rather a product of underlying patriarchal structures that value women solely for their reproductive capabilities and linked to this their role in commanding value for the procurement of cattle. According to several social learning theories, individuals understand behavior through observation, imitation, and modelling. In both conflict-affected and peaceful environments, violent masculinities and femininities are shaped by socially constructed and perpetuated norms related to the use of violence, which thus becomes a result of a socialization process, where people acquire specific behaviors which they consider essential for effective

¹⁵⁶ Knobloch, L. K., Pusateri, K. B., Ebata, A. T., & McGlaughlin, P. C. (2012). *Experiences of Military Youth During a Family Member's Deployment: Changes, Challenges, and Opportunities*. *Youth & Society*, 47(3), 319-342. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X12462040>.

¹⁵⁷ Abuom, T.O., Njenga, M.J., Wabacha, J.K., Tsuma, V.T., Gitau, G.K. (2012). Incidence and risk factors of periparturient conditions in smallholder dairy cattle herds in Kikuyu Division of Kiambu District, Kenya. *Ethiopian Veterinary Journal*, Vol. 16 n. 2.

participation in society. In South Sudan's recent history, most individuals and communities were in some way supporting either the largely volunteer-based SPLA or other armed groups, thus contributing to the normalization of violence as a simple way of life. The SPLA promoted violence as a legitimate way for the southern Sudanese to attain their political and economic goals and instilled in its recruits a sense of hyper-masculinity that glorified the power of armed force. In the post-conflict period, the notion that manhood is closely associated with gun ownership and warfare still persists¹⁵⁸.

As a driver for youth violence in South Sudan, one of the most prominent arguments regards familiar culture and exclusion. As a matter of fact, family naturally plays a significant role as an accountability structure for young people, and its absence increases the risk of youth to indulge or get absorbed into crime and other unlawful activities. In Africa, this sentiment is enhanced, given that people are generally identified according to their tribal and family lines. Thus, combined with the collapse or distortion of the family as a key unit of identity, the youth have adopted other means of shaping their own identity, such as joining a famous rebel group of vigilantes which becomes their new identity and instils a sense of pride. According to Oxfam research, inequalities between generations have grown at an alarming rate over the past few decades, and youth are largely excluded from formal political processes and thus continue to be subject to age-based systems of authority. Furthermore, they lack forums and opportunities for political participation and influence and are often underrepresented in influential government positions or in hierarchical systems that favor elders. In South Sudan, there is a clearly distinct separation between the spheres of military/government and home; being a youth in the country means inhabiting the tensions of the space between these spheres, given that many youngsters try to use their military recruitment to invest in their home or family. In another sense, instead of seeing youth as a passage between childhood and adulthood, South Sudanese young individuals intend it as a period of tension and choice, in which the two spheres seem to pull a naturally fragile category, leading to widespread frustration, marginalization, and repression, mainly in relation to elders in the society.

Furthermore, a pivotal stream encouraging many youths to participate in violence is represented by economic and social incentives, well present in a compromised society such as the South Sudanese one. The military role of young men in many cultures in South Sudan is related to social status and specific privileges; it affords them respect, the right to participate in decision making, and the ability to socialize with girls. According to a level of research¹⁵⁹, youth respondents perceived

¹⁵⁸ UNDP, Inter-Agency Working Group on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR).

¹⁵⁹ Lehman, N. (2015). Youth-Led Participatory Action Research: Budi County, Eastern Equatoria State, South Sudan. The Counter Extremism Hub.

conflict in two ways: some youth, often formally more educated, emphasize the negative aspects of conflict, while others youth, often warriors without formal education, perceived conflict, as well as fighting, as an avenue to access resources and elevate their social status. The civil war shaped new structures for leadership and mobilization of young men in rural areas, which are still employed for protection and large-scale inter-communal violence. Aside from mobilizing youth to be part of the forces of the warring parties, the Nuer and Dinka in South Sudan also organized their own sub-group youth militias (such as the White Armies and Gelweng) to protect their communities and form a kind of community police apparatus. Other ethnic groups adopted similar strategies to mobilise community self-defense groups based on armed youth, giving rise to the Murle (Yau Yau group), the Arrow Boys in Western Equatoria, the Monyemiji among the Lotuko of Eastern Equatoria, and the Maban Defense Force in Upper Nile State. In these scenarios, community defense and justice provision, in the form of revenge, has long been one of the strongest motivators for youth participation in violent confrontations; left to their own means, the disillusioned youth also sense a communal obligation to protect their ethnic communities, identity and property. This situation strengthened and reinforced the youths' subnational loyalties to their respective ethnic affiliations, jeopardizing efforts to forge a cohesive South Sudanese national identity. In a future perspective, pressure by elders, politicians or family on youths in South Sudan to defend against outside aggression or become aggressors themselves will continue in the foreseeable future and that while dangerous, these violent acts are calculated choices by young people, aimed at improving their chances of survival, social status and communal influence. Some young men have joined the rebellion in search of financial rewards, and South Sudan's dire economic situation may well have fed this dynamic, spurred criminal activity and increased the attractiveness of armed rebellion.

An often-overlooked dynamic leading to youth conflict, well established in Africa and in South Sudan, revolves around the concept of manhood. As a matter of fact, interpretations of manhood in Africa are socially constructed, fluid over time and in different settings, and plural; there is not an archetype of a typical young man in sub-Saharan Africa. However, a common key requirement to attaining manhood in Africa is achieving some level of financial independence, employment or income, and subsequently starting a family¹⁶⁰, reestablishing the rule of elder people over the youth. In South Sudan, young men who do not achieve a sense of socially respected manhood may be more likely to engage in violence, also because post-conflict contexts are characterized by negative norms of masculinity, often attributable to rigid, militaristic, violent, tough, sexist, and

¹⁶⁰ Barker, G., Ricardo, C. (2005). Young Men and the Construction of Masculinity in Sub-Saharan Africa: Implications for HIV/AIDS, Conflict, and Violence. GSDRC.

repressing imagery. Thus, men who have been members of armed groups are often heavily influenced by these norms even after conflicts have ended. This dynamic is well present even in the aforementioned practice of cattle raiding, since owning a gun and participating in a cattle raid are rites of passage for adolescent boys, and for men these are symbols of manhood and virility which confer social status. Even in official and recognized groups such as the SPLA, Recruitment is closely linked with militarized notions of masculinity and can provide a sense of identity and self-worth which would otherwise be difficult to find. This pattern of thought is also reproduced by women, since women in South Sudan are just as likely as men to believe violence is a valid way to solve conflicts, influencing attitudes and behavior in informal social spaces like the home. It is not uncommon in South Sudanese households to emphasize violent acts of the youth as expressions of bravery, which women refer to with pride, fostering in young males a responsibility to participate in community defense. Moreover, in order to be recognized as full adults, male and female youth in South Sudan must marry and build a family¹⁶¹. In recent times, an increasing inability of male youth to meet rising bride price demands has been observed. Consequently, many male youths enlist in militias, join cattle raids, or seek wives from different ethnic groups or countries. Many young men in South Sudan, deprived of their livelihoods and made destitute by cattle raids, are under severe pressure to meet escalating bridewealth costs, increasing the susceptibility of young men to elite patronage, where cattle protection and military loyalty are exchanged for gifts from elites of guns and ammunition; findings have shown that one of the prime motivations to raid cattle is to be able to pay the bride price, alongside the pride people take in being warriors who defend the community.

Finally, the last motivation which induces young South Sudanese to engage in violent conflict refers to the sphere of political power inequalities. Politicians in South Sudan have been increasingly more capable of mobilizing their youth base to settle political scores, given that youth seeking to establish their social and financial independence and influence, yet struggling under the burden of a lack of education, relevant and marketable skills, and scarce work opportunities to apply those skills, are prime targets for politicians searching for foot soldiers to carry out their battles to gain political influence. Military commanders also have language and terminology to mobilize young cattle keepers by associating fighting with moral justice and community protection and rights, and they are also known to establish military loyalty by contributing to the bridewealth of their soldiers. Thus, in South Sudan the presence of armed youth militias is not just a product of local disputes, but rather the effect of government forces arming cattle herders as a method of creating proxy fighters to ally against any

¹⁶¹ Danish Refugee Council (2017).

existing opposition forces, as well as ensuring that new opposition is not created by keeping local communities satisfied and feeling able to defend themselves.

In conclusion, it seems that demographic factors do play an enormous role in shaping and motivating violent conflict in South Sudan, especially due to their impact and social dynamics on the young population. It is now possible to explore the other two mentioned factors, in order to determine the contextual influence of each one and deliberate on whether all the considered variables have a correlation with South Sudan's proneness to conflict, starting with the availability of natural resources.

3.3 THE NATURAL RESOURCES CAUSE

The second prominent narrative worth examining when trying to determine the underlying causes of South Sudan's facility to enter or engage in violence and armed conflicts refers to the aforementioned issue of availability of natural resources, their availability, and the consequent competition for their control¹⁶². Naturally, such criticality is profoundly intertwined with the demographic dynamics of population growth that South Sudan is experiencing to this day; thus the aim of this paragraph is to understand the impact of the fight for natural resources on the creation of conflict, and how dependent this relation is from the original root of demography, distinguishing the stream of competition for scarce primary resources such as water and food, enhanced by the rise in the country's total population, and the one of economically-driven interest towards marketable resources, which is obviously predominantly related to the control over South Sudan's oil production factory. Aside from sporadic attempts, the majority of the proponents of civil wars being caused by natural resources tend to fall short of providing a convincing argument to sustain their theory, especially because a well-constructed counter could argue that natural resources dependency may be identified more as a product of civil war, rather than the opposite. Notwithstanding the numerous possible critics to this logic, it is still pivotal to understand which elements contribute to the realization of the theory according to which civil wars in South Sudan might be fueled by the competition for natural resources.

¹⁶² See Chapter Two.

3.3.1 Water and Food Scarcity Leading to Civil War

Over the past decades, research and policy debate on the impact of water-related shortages and hazards on conflict risk has expanded notably, with several studies focusing on the situation of South Sudan. In fact, the potential for water to contribute to armed conflict and unrest has been definitively recognized, with reports of violence erupting over access to water resources and often closely intertwined with conflicts over access to land for crop production and livestock grazing¹⁶³. The country's already fragile environment, in fact, is set to be strained even more by the development of extractive industries and new water-related risks, thus impacting on the number and intensity of potential and established conflicts.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses highlight the existence of significant links between water availability, droughts, and the occurrence of violence, with more severe water shortages associated with higher levels of brutality and violent confrontations¹⁶⁴. In South Sudan, data shows that drier periods are associated with higher levels of conflict, and the potential motivations are a few.

First, dry periods negatively affect livelihoods, and with the majority of the South Sudanese population being directly dependent on water resources for their basic needs, the impact of water shortages on living conditions is remarkable. More specifically, droughts affect two core components of South Sudanese livelihoods, namely cattle and mobility. As a matter of fact, droughts disrupt livestock grazing activities by limiting land and water resources availability, which can in turn ignite tensions as competing herders try to gain access to those limited resources¹⁶⁵. Furthermore, these conditions could also lead to an oversupply of livestock in local markets, since herders are forced to sell more cattle to face hardships, causing a decrease in livestock prices and a related increase in the price of other food items, further affecting household incomes. In order to fight this spiral of negativities, herders may be tempted to engage in cattle raiding activities, increasing the probability of violent conflicts. At the same time, when water shortages affect determined areas of usual water availability, pastoralists are bound to change their mobility patterns, increasing the probability of

¹⁶³ Yaw Tchie, A., Grand, A.O., Tarif, K. (2021). *Climate, Peace and Security Fact Sheet: South Sudan*. SIPRI Publications.

¹⁶⁴ Maystadt, J.F., Calderone, M., You, L. (2015). *Local warming and violent conflict in North and South Sudan*. *Journal of Economic Geography*, Volume 15, Issue 3, Pages 649–671, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jeg/lbu033>.

¹⁶⁵ The World Bank Group (2023). *Water Security and Fragility: Insights from South Sudan*.

encountering other groups, with which they may not share customary institutions and mechanisms to settle disputes¹⁶⁶, resulting in tensions and, possibly, violence.

Furthermore, even qualitative research provides nuance to the findings from empirical assessments, suggesting that the links between water and conflict also materialize during floods, and not only in the occurrence of droughts. In fact, when water is overly abundant, pastoralists might depart from negotiated access and customary institutions for accessing water resources and land, which, again, could move them closer to other groups, inciting competition over shared resources or making them more vulnerable to cattle raiding. Areas close to the Sudd wetland that experience high variation in land cover, from standing waters during times of floods to grasslands when the waters recede, also experience frequent conflicts, particularly at the boundary between Unity and Warrap states. This situation further highlights the multifaceted links between water and conflict, with water scarcity being just one potential channel through which water combines with social and political factors to increase conflict risk.

Notwithstanding the existence of these links between water and conflict, it is pivotal to emphasize that droughts or floods rarely, if ever, completely explain the occurrence of conflict and violence. The impacts of water on conflict and violence dynamics are in fact profoundly intertwined with other pressures on livelihoods, mobility, and incomes, and only an interconnection of these factors contribute to the proliferation of violent conflicts. Still, it is notable how governmental élites tend to exploit extreme climatic conditions, escalating conflicts over water resources which start at the community level. Political élites, in fact, exploit local grievances and tensions over water resources to inflict damage on political opponents, influence national political struggles, or promote top-down water resources development to exclude populations from development opportunities¹⁶⁷.

To complete the discourse on the relationship between water and conflict, it might be interesting to point out the role of water as both a casualty and a weapon in times of conflict. As a probably banal consequence of heavy fighting, a warring country's water and sanitation infrastructure suffers long-lasting damage when involved in the hostilities. The destruction of such important hubs has immediate impact on the affected populations, due to the lack of drinking water, food, and healthcare. In the case of South Sudan, access to drinking water supply services in rural areas has

¹⁶⁶ van Baalen, S., Mobjörk, M. (2018). *Climate Change and Violent Conflict in East Africa: Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Research to Probe the Mechanisms*. International Studies Review, Volume 20, Issue 4, Pages 547–575, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/vix043>.

¹⁶⁷ Selby, J., Hoffmann, C. (2014). Beyond scarcity: Rethinking water, climate change and conflict in the Sudans. Global Environmental Change, Volume 29.

declines, as seen in Chapter Two, mainly due to forced displacement, infrastructural damage, and pump failure, exacerbated by the issue of brain drain which causes a lack of water utility staff and operators. In South Sudan, violence and conflict have been intentionally targeted toward water resources or human-built water systems to inflict damage on opponents in several instances, as discovered by UNHCR investigations, identifying access to water as a weapon to inflict damage. As an example, In Lakes state, deliberate tactics weaponized water to weaken communities, with warring parties systematically destroying or stealing pumps used by locals, depriving them of access to water for both consumption and sanitation¹⁶⁸.

In conclusion, the broad and widespread issue of water security is extremely difficult to achieve in fragile, warring contexts, and the failure to achieve water security multiplies the consequences bestowed upon the civil population. South Sudan is currently enduring this vicious cycle, which risks undermining development and peace-building efforts, and will be further exacerbated by a pressing climate change. If we try to identify the roots of such spiral, protracted armed conflict is the main suspect, given that it increases poverty, halts economic activities, disrupts livelihoods, and damages social networks and formal and informal institutions. These political and socioeconomic impacts, in a domino effect, increase vulnerability to climate change, deepening the spiral of misery. In the context of South Sudan, this vulnerability is further compounded by the large share of the population relying directly on water resources and other natural assets, whose availability and variability is influenced by climate, for their basic needs and livelihoods. This climate sensitivity combines with social and political factors to undermine the coping capacity of populations to respond to climate change, so that once floods or droughts strike, damage is even greater. Humanitarian emergencies around the world demonstrate this vicious cycle, with most food crises taking place in locations with high vulnerability to climate change and experiencing protracted armed conflict¹⁶⁹. In South Sudan, the vicious cycle manifests itself when people forcibly displaced by conflict settle in flood and hazard-prone areas, becoming the first individuals to be affected by adverse events, which lead to further displacement. This repeated displacement cycle increases the risk of negative impacts, including loss of life from floods and droughts, and prevents populations from building their coping capacity to adapt to future shocks. Breaking this cycle should become a priority for South Sudan's government, which should intervene to avoid exacerbating existing fragilities and tensions. Moreover, water management and related customary institutions should be leveraged to promote cooperation and peacebuilding, as the virtuous example of the post-independence period of South Sudan shows.

¹⁶⁸ UN Human Rights Council (2020).

¹⁶⁹ Buhaug, H., von Uexkull, N. (2021). *Vicious circles: Violence, vulnerability, and climate change*. Annual Review of Environment and Resources 46: 545–568.

In fact, after the creation of the northern border, communities living alongside it conducted a series of meetings and reached an agreement on sharing of access to water resources despite the tensions between the two countries. Nevertheless, without restored social relations conducive to cooperation, water sector interventions are unlikely to succeed. Although existing localized systems of dispute resolution and resource management can be effective in helping to manage conflict, they are not useful if not paired with significant responses at the governmental level. In an analysis of local responses to conflict in Lakes state¹⁷⁰, it appears that the greater level of peace in eastern Lakes state can be partly explained because of the different responses by community leaders; although both eastern and western parts of Lakes state experienced similar sources of conflict relating to cattle theft, the constructive response of community leaders in the eastern part of the state allowed for a greater level of peace than in neighboring areas, and this virtuous example should be immediately followed by leaders of areas prone to water-related conflicts.

3.3.2 Is Oil Fueling the Civil War?

According to some scholars, the narrative according to which oil is a primary driver in fueling the Civil War in South Sudan is to be considered and favored, given that the warring parties are to be intended as keen on controlling oil and other natural resources¹⁷¹. It is indeed undoubtable that, in the case of South Sudan, oil represents the most important source of government revenue, and oil-producing states such as Unity, Jonglei, and Upper Nile have endured the most devastating effects of the Civil War, with reports of the most intense combat operations in these areas. In 2014, US-based think-tanks alleged that oil revenues in the country were recycled and used to sustain the at the time ongoing Civil War, in order to enrich lobbies and élites which benefited from the continuance of conflict¹⁷². Nevertheless, the allegations were immediately rejected by the government, which stated that oil revenues were only utilized to pay civil servants. Natural resources are in most cases location-specific, so even in times of war they remain constant while mobile sectors such as industries can flee; South Sudan has been at war for more than half a century, and it is only the oil sector that has been sustaining not simply the war but the economy.

¹⁷⁰ Ryle, J., Amuom, M. (2018). Peace is the Name of Our Cattle-Camp. Local responses to conflict in Eastern Lakes State, South Sudan. South Sudan Customary Authorities Project.

¹⁷¹ Ballentine, K., Nitzschke, H. (2005). *Profiting from Peace: Managing the Resource Dimensions of Civil War*. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

¹⁷² Rolandsen, Ø. H. (2015). *Another civil war in South Sudan: the failure of Guerrilla Government?* Journal of Eastern African Studies, 9(1), 163–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2014.993210>.

Notwithstanding the critics and potential flaws of the oil-fueling narrative of the South Sudanese Civil War, numerous works have been conducted in order to prove a substantial correlation between the continuation of the conflict and the benefits that both the oil industry and elite individuals close to the government have obtained. In March 2018, an initiative denominated The Sentry (founded and directed by the Not Enough Project and Not On Our Watch) conducted an inquiry on the allegation according to which the oil industry and its representatives, backed by the South Sudanese government, gained enormous benefits from the continuation of the Civil War, which they have (directly or indirectly) funded, guaranteeing the continuance of the atrocities¹⁷³. According to retrieved documents, there would be proof that South Sudan's leaders have used the country's oil wealth to enrich themselves by ensuring the protraction of the Civil War, using South Sudan's main revenue source to fuel militias and ongoing atrocities. It appears that, allegedly, funds from South Sudan's state oil company, Nile Petroleum Corporation (Nilepet) has contributed to the funding of militias, responsible for horrific acts of violence. Furthermore, millions of dollars are said to have been paid by Nilepet to a number of companies partially owned by family members of government officials, responsible for funding government-aligned militias and high-rank military.

The most overwhelming piece of evidence is an internal log kept by South Sudan's Ministry of Petroleum and Mining, which contained a detail of security-related payments made by Nilepet; in total, more than 80 million dollars have been allegedly given to politicians, military officials, government agencies, and private companies, behind activities directly linked to the government's war effort. Despite the horrendous impact that the South Sudanese Civil War has bestowed upon the civil population, and the consequent dire economic and social conditions in which citizens are forced to live, many of the top officials responsible for the outburst of the conflict have accrued enormous wealth, both for themselves and for their families. From the information contained in the document, it appears that South Sudan's Petroleum Ministry directly assisted in the provision of food, fuel, satellite phone airtime and money to a group of militias in the Upper Nile state. There, the militias are reportedly responsible for destroying villages and attacks against civilians, including a February 2016 attack against civilians at a UN site in Malakal, which provoked a dozen casualties. Specifically, government top officials are accused of having used Nilepet funds to support a group of Padang Dinka militias, commonly referred to collectively as the Oil Protection Force or the White Army, active in northeastern Upper Nile state and implicated in widespread attacks against civilians and other atrocities. Composed of members of the Padang Dinka subethnic group from greater Upper Nile, these militia groups were initially established to protect oil fields in Paloch but eventually evolved to

¹⁷³ The Sentry (2018). Fueling Atrocities: Oil and War in South Sudan.

become central actors in South Sudan’s evolving civil war when they began receiving direct support from South Sudan’s National Security Service. According to Small Arms Survey, this group of militias targeted primarily the Shilluk ethnic group, engaging in a series of massive attacks and burnings directed towards the civil population, and were supported by the Petroleum Ministry between 2014 and 2015 in the form of more than 1.1 million dollars’ worth of food, armaments, and economic aid. Given that the aforementioned armed forces operate outside a formal state military structure, the militias are, by definition, paramilitary forces. Organizing and supporting them appears to contradict a provision of the South Sudan Constitution, which affirms that “no person or persons shall raise any armed or paramilitary force in South Sudan except in accordance with this Constitution and the law”¹⁷⁴.

Delving more in particular on the individuals and companies who benefited from the continuance of the conflict thanks to the governmental payments through the petroleum industry, it appears that numerous companies and organizations linked to individuals close to South Sudan’s government élites have been (directly or not) paid and funded for their sustaining actions in respect to the civil war. This is particularly true in the case of five transportation firms: Interstate Airways, whose 33% shareholder is identified in the First Lady Mayardit, Nile Basin for Aviation, owned in part by the wife of then-military chief of staff, Paul Malong, Crown Auto Trade, managed by a prominent South Sudanese businessman, Obac William Olawo, Frontier Services Group, connected to businessman Erik Prince, and Golden Wings Aviation. Each of these companies is allegedly identified to have been involved in transactions related to flights or military logistics operations in 2014 and 2015, during a period of intense fighting in Unity and Upper Nile. These companies received payments from Nilepet for military or security-related activities, and, as a result, may have supported, wittingly or unknowingly, forces responsible for perpetrating atrocities.

The reasons for which it is possible to believe that oil is a propellant for civil wars in South Sudan mainly sits in the failure in the application of the country’s oil revenue management and anti-corruption laws. As a matter of fact, the oil sector was set to become the most transparent area in South Sudan’s economy, but any effort to promote transparency was shortly after stifled. In 2017, the International Monetary Fund reported that Nilepet fell short in providing transparent accounting on its financial activities, and that no dividends were paid to the central government¹⁷⁵. Furthermore, the

¹⁷⁴ Government of South Sudan (2011). *The Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan*. http://www.sudantribune.com/IMG/pdf/The_Draft_Transitional_Constitution_of_the_ROSS2-2.pdf.

¹⁷⁵ International Monetary Fund (2017). *South Sudan: 2016 Article IV Consultation—Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for South Sudan*. IMF Country Report No. 17/73, p. 15.

UN Panel of Experts on South Sudan reported that the at the time Minister of Petroleum and Mining directed the national oil company to cover military-related expenses, circumventing national budget and financial management processes. The aforementioned transactions were not included in the country's budget or otherwise subjected to any form of public scrutiny, raising serious concerns about whether these payments were part of an off-budget finance mechanism, representing a diversion of State assets.

In conclusion, even though the petroleum sector is meant to be the source of South Sudan's future, the documents reviewed by The Sentry suggest that oil is intimately linked to violence. Fortunately, the financial realities of the international oil business and the potential for enhanced governance measures suggest that action can be taken, and the promise of the sector realized, according to several possible routes. First, the transactions through which the South Sudanese government purchased weapons, paid companies to transport weapons, troops, and supplies around the country, and made payments to the offices of several of the top officials responsible for planning and executing the war, were all completed using US dollars. Dollar-denominated transactions provide a source of leverage that the international community must exploit to bring South Sudanese officials to the negotiating table and to promote peace, respect for human rights, and good governance in the country. In fact, through a system of correspondent banking, any US dollar-denominated transaction passes, even for an instant, through American banks, which thus have jurisdiction over the transactions. This means that asset freezes and anti-money laundering measures directed at those doing business in dollars can have great impact, even when those individuals or entities are not in the United States, because banks in New York and around the globe can face the consequences of directing illicit transactions through the U.S. financial system. Secondly, the international community should immediately start to expand financial pressure on the responsible individuals and companies in South Sudan, also employing sanctions directed by the United States and the European Union, in order to prompt greater due diligence and risk mitigation. Finally, banks and financial regulators should enhance efforts to halt the flow of illicit funds out of South Sudan, with the help of multilateral agreements and a general international coordination. Even though neighboring countries have been reluctant to engage in financial restrictive measures against South Sudan, the international community should do anything to promote such efforts, increasing pressure on those responsible for the South Sudanese Civil War.

In summation, the theories that support the narrative according to which the fight for natural resources, mainly water and oil, are the most prominent drivers for civil wars in South Sudan appear to have several concrete bases, but the sense of the correlation between the outburst of armed conflict and the competition over scarce and available natural resources remains unclear, given that the latter could be understood as a byproduct of the former. Nevertheless, it is undoubtable that natural resources do play an enormously impactful role on the continuance and exacerbation of violent and armed conflict, independently from their reciprocal cause-effect correlation. In the last block of this chapter's analysis, the considered element of ignition of armed conflict in South Sudan will be the interest and intervention of external actors, expressed in both economic and military aid, procurement of arms, economic investments, and infrastructure interests which may have disrupted an already delicate balance in a country where peaceful times are yet to be seen.

3.4 THE BEHAVIOR OF EXTERNAL ACTORS CAUSE

The final analyzed narrative considered in this work referring to the causes through which the South Sudanese Civil War might have stemmed revolves around the behavior of external actors, involved in the start of the conflict, its prosecution, and its incomplete ending in a plethora of ways. As a matter of fact, numerous attempts from various protagonists of the international community have been concluded, with the aim to solve the everlasting conflictual nature of the world's youngest state, but due to a lack of care, institutions, and willpower, even international players have failed to put an end to South Sudan's miserable recent past. According to this reasoning, the behavior of external actors could be intended as the true catalyst of the country's proneness to conflict, in the sense that the failure to impose and enforce corrective mechanisms has only enhanced the discomfort and sense of abandonment in a civil population tormented by continuous violence for decades.

There are several actors which might have contributed, in different measures, to the outbreak of armed violence in South Sudan or to the continuance of conflict. From a diplomatic standpoint, the sentiment is that the efforts promoted by the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States have not been followed by a concrete and established enforcement, leaving South Sudan with a new, externally imposed apparatus of norms and rules, but without any monitoring whatsoever by those who pushed the realization of such measures. Furthermore, the commercial and economic interests of the United States, China, and Sudan might have resulted in a direct or indirect involvement in the belligerence, also due to the plague of the incredibly easy access to arms, which has hammered the country after the conclusion of any conflict. Finally, as briefly anticipated in the previous chapter,

the ambiguous and reluctant behavior of regional actors, such as Kenya, Uganda, Egypt, and Ethiopia, in their decision on where to side in the conflict has only exacerbated the already existing tensions, aggravating the situation of refugees and displaced people fleeing from the civil war. The objective of this paragraph, thus, is to shed a light on the role of external actors in the outburst and continuance of armed violence in South Sudan, in order to try and understand if the negligence, lack of care, or even malfeasance of statal and non-statal actors of the international community could be referred to as one of the primary motors of the continuous warring state of South Sudan.

This analysis moves its steps from the signing of the aforementioned Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS), accepted in 2015 by the warring parties under the communal effort by the International Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union, the United Nations (through UNMISS), China, the European Union, the United States, United Kingdom, and Norway. As appears, the conflict in South Sudan contemplates the presence of several international actors, such as China and the United States, international intergovernmental organizations, like the United Nations and the European Union, and regional actors, under the aegis of IGAD and the African Union. Even if the majority of these actors are considered to have played a magnanimous, peaceful role in the civil war, many scholars argue that the involvement of most of them has been driven by vested political and economic interests. Each player brings its own set of approaches, relationships, motivations and historical understandings to its dealings with the warring parties. Mainly driven by interests in South Sudan's economic resources, all external forces have shaped (and continue to do so) the country's political, social, and conflict dynamics in a series of fluctuating and contradictory ways.

3.4.1 The Role of Neighboring Countries

The interplay between national interests of South Sudan's neighboring countries represents one of the key prisms through which these states have influenced the destiny of the world's youngest country. In fact, South Sudan has attracted investors and interests from Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Egypt to various sectors of its economy, which pushed these actors to act in order to protect and guarantee their investments. Thus, it is pivotal to understand the individual motives and the interplay of allegiances which moved neighboring countries to undertake a specific behavior in respect to the civil war in South Sudan.

The first substantial dynamic that shaped the conflict in South Sudan since 1955 is the interplay between Uganda and Sudan, probably the two most involved countries in the intestine conflict of South Sudan¹⁷⁶. As a matter of fact, the rivalry between Uganda and Sudan started in the second half of the 20th century, when the former supported the first rebellion of southern Sudan, and nowadays both countries wish to maintain their influence and political and financial benefits, and to ensure that South Sudan does not harbor opposition movements. Over time, Uganda has provided substantial political and military support to the SPLM, which made Sudan perceive Uganda as a long-time supporter of the rebels aiming at regime change in Khartoum. Moreover, the Ugandan government has always been prone to support President Kiir's regime, and its forces have been directly involved in the internal South Sudanese conflict; the Ugandan army was accused of acting as a proxy force in the war, committing crimes against civilians and illegally exploiting the countries' resources, without any authorization to intervene by both the UNSC and the African Union. The involvement of Ugandan troops in the South Sudan Civil War definitely escalated the conflict, as it has been admitted even by the South Sudanese government that about 70% of the SPLA deserted to join the Machar forces and had it not been for the intervention of Uganda, Juba would have fallen to Machar. Nevertheless, in the latest South Sudan Civil War, the two states are strategically and simultaneously acting as impartial mediators because of their membership of IGAD, but at the same time as partisan parties supporting their proxies. The deep mistrust between Uganda and Sudan markedly drives the current South Sudanese crisis, since the two countries are involved in a zero-sum game contributing to the military and political stalemate of South Sudan. Moreover, Uganda has historical, security, political, and economic interests that prompted it to intervene militarily in South Sudan in support of a poorly organized government fighting for survival and entirely dependent on oil revenues. On the other hand, Sudan is mainly interested in maintaining its status of dominant power in South Sudan and resisting Uganda's northward interference, fearing that the actual Ugandan policy aims at robbing South Sudan of its oil wealth and enhancing its predominance in the region¹⁷⁷. However, given the protraction of the critical situation of South Sudan, the two countries have been open to aligning their interests and finding mutually beneficial arrangements, in contrast to the conventional wisdom that they are at perennial loggerheads on South Sudan. But these arrangements may come at the expense of South Sudan's citizens; the powerful role that Uganda and Sudan have enshrined for themselves in the outcome of the agreements represents neocolonialism at its worst and

¹⁷⁶ Kuol, L., Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2018). *Navigating the Competing Interests of Regional Actors in South Sudan*. In *Envisioning a Stable South Sudan* (pp. 53–64). Africa Center for Strategic Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19226.11>

¹⁷⁷ Micheni, I. (2017). *Revisiting the Role of International and Regional Actors in the South Sudan Conflict*. HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies. <https://horninstitute.org/revisiting-the-role-of-international-and-regional-actors-in-the-south-sudan-conflict/>.

serves as an economic coup by those in Khartoum and Kampala who seek to benefit at the expense of the people of South Sudan.

Furthermore, another pivotal interplay which has shaped the continuance of conflict in South Sudan is represented by the relationships between Ethiopia, Egypt, Sudan, and Eritrea, all regional forces trying to gain advantage from the delicate scenario¹⁷⁸. Starting from Ethiopia, its decision to take a neutral stance in the latest crisis was curtailed by the hosting of Machar during the peace process, enforced by the close ties with the United States, the main proponent of tougher measures against the South Sudanese government. When the relations between Ethiopia and South Sudan became increasingly tense, the latter pursued rapprochement with Eritrea and Egypt. In this situation, Eritrea aims at lifting its shaking regional position, improving its political vulnerability, and solving its economic difficulties, trying to maintain amicable rapports with Sudan. Officially, both countries have externalized their support to the South Sudanese government, but it is essentially confirmed that they have shared interests in curbing the role of Uganda and Ethiopia in South Sudan. On Egypt's side, its interest in playing a role in the crisis is moved by a greater diplomatic scenario, related to the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), a source of tension between Egypt and Ethiopia for years related to the use of the waters of River Nile. In this intricated exchequer, the government of South Sudan, with alleged facilitation from Uganda, strengthened its diplomatic ties with Egypt, intending to weaken Sudan and Ethiopia's influence in South Sudan. In exchange for Juba's support of its position, Egypt consistently used its seat on the UN Security Council and the African Union Peace and Security Council to deflect pressure from Ethiopia and others to accept a negotiated settlement to the civil war. Egypt, which cooperates with the government of South Sudan on water projects, has also provided military support, including arms, ammunition, and training, to President Kiir's forces, jeopardizing the relationship between South Sudan and Ethiopia.

Notwithstanding the enormous amount of complexity that the regional exchequer adds to an already delicate situation, the frame can only be completed by observing how external players and international organizations have influenced the destiny of the conflict, trying to mediate, foster peaceful accords, and satisfy their own economic interests in the region.

¹⁷⁸ Gahungu, R. (2023). Who are the main external actors in the quest for peace in South Sudan and why did they fail to achieve peace in the young state? In Alusala, N., Asige Liaga, E., Revai Rupiya, M. (2023). *Conflict Management and Resolution in South Sudan* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003410249>.

3.4.2 The Role of Foreign Powers and International Organizations

In order to completely understand the dynamics of international intervention in the South Sudanese crisis, it is pivotal to understand how external actors, potentially extraneous to the dynamics of the Horn of Africa, have influenced the conflict, and which interests they may have in both the short and long-term period.

The most present external actor in the difficult situation of South Sudan in the last few decades is undoubtedly represented by the United States, whose support to the southern Sudan has been present even in the pre-independence era, when Washington provided humanitarian aid and played a critical role in the negotiation of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement. In more recent times, the external pressure leading to the signing of the peace accord in 2015 was primarily driven by Washington, which remains the largest single donor of humanitarian support to South Sudan. Nevertheless, since 2011, political relationships between the US and South Sudan have gradually deteriorated, mostly due to the ambiguous behavior of the latter's government in supporting rebels in Sudan's border areas of Blue Nile and South Kordofan¹⁷⁹. Moreover, the weakness of Juba's efforts to combat corruption and institute effective financial and budgetary controls, alongside the continuous human rights violations directed even to journalists, have contributed to a progressive detachment by the Washington government.

The situation eventually became more intricated when the United States started its competition for influence over the government of South Sudan with the most recent international player in the scene: China. As already mentioned in Chapter Two, China's renowned interest in South Sudan's oil economy, paired with the major investment projects that Beijing has started in the country, started to draw South Sudan towards the Chinese sphere of influence, igniting a sentiment of fear in Washington¹⁸⁰. Recently, South Sudanese government members have publicly criticized the US behavior in the region, affirming the potential shift towards China, which, on its side, remains diplomatically silent. Notwithstanding the respective interests in exercising influence over South Sudan, the behavior of the US and China is far from being assimilable. In fact, the US have long sought a mediated solution to the crisis, actively engaging in negotiation talks and supporting IGAD's

¹⁷⁹ Mutasa, C., Virk, K. (2017). *The Role of External Actors in South Sudan*. In *Building Peace In South Sudan: Progress, Problems, And Prospects* (pp. 30–33). Centre for Conflict Resolution. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05143.12>

¹⁸⁰ Micheni, I. (2017). *Revisiting the Role of International and Regional Actors in the South Sudan Conflict*. HORN International Institute for Strategic Studies. <https://horninstitute.org/revisiting-the-role-of-international-and-regional-actors-in-the-south-sudan-conflict/>.

determination through financial aid. Moreover, the US have been leading in the imposition of an arms embargo, travel ban and asset freeze in South Sudan, convincing China, Russia and Japan to vote for the UN Resolution on an arms embargo in 2018. Nevertheless, it is argued that instead of seizing the opportunity to define the basic outlines of a settlement in South Sudan, the United States haplessly backed mediation efforts riven by regional discord and vulnerable to manipulation by the warring parties and other external actors¹⁸¹. On the Chinese side, the behavior maintained by Beijing has been ambiguous and obscure. Notwithstanding China's leading principle of non-interference, the country has been profoundly involved with South Sudan's crisis, both contributing to the UN peacekeeping missions (probably to ensure the protection of its own interests in loco), and by solving the role of South Sudan's government top weapons provider. As a result, many voices in South Sudan and the international community have accused Beijing of prolonging the conflict, claiming it is playing a contradictory role by arming South Sudan's military while investing time, effort and money in peace talks.

Aside from external statal actors, it is key to understand the role solved by international and intergovernmental organizations, both at the regional and at the global level. Starting from IGAD, its role in South Sudan dates back to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, negotiated under its auspices; in 2015, IGAD expanded its catchment area, including Algeria, Chad, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Africa, the UN, the Troika, the EU, and China, playing a critical mediation role for the negotiation of the ARCSS¹⁸². Nevertheless, IGAD's efforts were seen by many players as attempts to strengthen South Sudan's government's position, rather than trying to achieve an objective peace. As a matter of fact, one of the obstacles to the IGAD mediation is the involvement of its countries in the conflict. Regional states have aggressively pursued concrete geopolitical interests, competed for influence in South Sudan, and repeatedly crossed each other's red lines. Thus, IGAD has been ultimately unsuccessful because of the lack of political will on the part of the warring parties and the vested economic, security, and political interests of countries in the region. This makes the prospect for IGAD's role in South Sudan gloomy, as most of the member countries have incompatible interests in the country. Alongside IGAD, the African Union tried to maintain an impartial and mediating role in South Sudan's crisis, limiting its activity to the publishing of a memorandum of understanding that detailed the need for cooperation on peace and security issues. The African Union has played more of a supporting role, although its engagement via the AU Commission of Inquiry was an important

¹⁸¹ Alusala, N., Asige Liaga, E., Revai Rupiya, M. (2023). *Conflict Management and Resolution in South Sudan* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003410249>.

¹⁸² Adino, T., Abebe, D. (2025). *An assessment of the evolution and development of IGAD in the Horn of Africa since 1986*. Regional & Federal Studies, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2025.2515438>.

contribution to examining the causes of the war and offering recommendations for accountability and institutional reforms.

Finally, the United States, United Kingdom, and Norway, together known as the Troika, played an important part in the South Sudan crisis by financially and politically supporting the IGAD-led process. However, in a confidential note to the IGAD countries, the Troika and European Union expressed their frustration with the implementation of the peace agreement and called for concrete steps to amend the deal and to consolidate the bodies entrusted with the monitoring process¹⁸³. The European Union, through the active participation of the EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa, monitored the peace talks and supported IGAD as well as the African Union's commitment with regard to the end of the crisis. From an international standpoint, the UN contribution has been essential in terms of humanitarian assistance, notably with regard to the protection of civilians. The UNSC has sought to bolster the region's efforts to facilitate a political solution to the crisis, including through the threat of sanctions, and has authorized the deployment of additional peacekeepers to protect civilians and to support both humanitarian relief operations and the peace process. Nevertheless, both warring parties have accused UNMISS to support the other, given the fact that its member states had conflicting interests in South Sudan.

In conclusion, external intervention does undoubtedly represent a primary reason for the continuance of the conflict and the difficulties which South Sudan had to endure in cementing a situation of peace, given the fact that its equilibrium is continuously shaken by other players' economic, commercial, and geopolitical interests. Due to such an intricately international scenario, it is difficult to believe that a lasting peace agreement is going to be found in the near future, mainly because of three motives: the lack of commitment by the warring parties to implement any peace deal, the complete absence of an authority capable of guaranteeing the sustainability of peaceful resolutions, and the continuous critics that each external actor moves to the drafts of peace agreements, which all find, in turn, too favorable to any counterpart in the delicate geopolitical equilibrium of the region. Furthermore, other significant reasons can be found in the agreement's lack of inclusivity and respect of ethnic differences, the progressive but substantial disengagement of South Sudan's international partners in the implementation of the peace deal, and the contradictory behavior that involved mediators have demonstrated. The conflict in South Sudan has become intractable because of the narrow interests of regional players and the international community's

¹⁸³ EEAS Press Team (2022). *South Sudan: Statement by the European Union and the Troika on Violence in Upper Nile and Jonglei States*. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/423932_fr.

inability to take firm action. Moreover, the pursuit of power, authority and control of national resources by influential politicians in South Sudan for personal benefit remains a significant obstacle to the peace agreement, deepened by the lack of political will among the warring parties and the absence of their commitment to peace deals. On its own, pressure from the international community will not be enough to bring lasting peace. The warring parties must be committed to negotiating a sustainable peace deal that takes into consideration the interests of all South Sudanese and all ethnic differences, a vital source of legitimacy and stability in the country.

Having finally observed the most prominent narratives that try to explain South Sudan's belligerence and proneness to armed conflict, it is possible to delineate a more precise framework, determining which variable appears to be the most effective in the explanation of the country's nature. Through the utilization of internationally recognized indexes, it is also possible to forecast South Sudan's future evolution in terms of stability, conflict, and life conditions, which will represent the last element of this analysis.

CHAPTER FOUR: STABILITY MEASUREMENT AND HYPOTHESIS

VALIDATION

In order to completely frame South Sudan's conflictual situation to this day and to test the impact that the aforementioned variables might exercise on the country's proneness to conflict and violence, it could be useful to observe the data provided by global stability and peace indicators, which help delineating a correct observation of the phenomenon. Furthermore, facets of such indicators are directly based on the impact of demography, natural resources, and geopolitical implications, thus offering a different light on the potential interplay between the variables. Finally, keeping faith to the original argument of this work, it will be possible to draw some potential future scenarios for the country, before delving into conclusions and perspective policy recommendations which could be enacted to ameliorate South Sudan's condition. These final observations will be conducted on the basis of three indicators, namely the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP)'s Global Peace Index¹⁸⁴, the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index¹⁸⁵, and the ACLED Conflict Index¹⁸⁶. Through the analysis of the results produced by these indexes, in fact, the hypothesized correlation between the variables of demography, availability of natural resources, and proneness to engage in armed conflict, will be tested (if possible), trying to observe how external indexes interpret any potential interplay.

4.1 THE GLOBAL PEACE INDEX

The Global Peace Index (GPI) is one of the world's most utilized methods to calculate peacefulness, both on a global and on a national scale. In particular, it measures a country's level of negative peace by plotting 23 indicators of the absence of violence or fear of violence, which determine scores on three principal domains. The first domain, denominated Ongoing Domestic and International Conflict, implies the use of six indicators¹⁸⁷ to observe the extent to which countries are currently involved in internal and external conflicts, alongside their role and duration of involvement in them. The second domain evaluates the level of harmony or discord within a certain nation, through scores on eleven indicators¹⁸⁸ which broadly encompass Societal Safety and Security. The logical assertion is that low

¹⁸⁴ <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/#/>

¹⁸⁵ <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>

¹⁸⁶ <https://acleddata.com/>

¹⁸⁷ Number and duration of internal conflicts, deaths from external and internal organized conflict, number, duration, and role in external conflicts, and intensity of organized internal conflict.

¹⁸⁸ Perceived criminality, number of refugees and internally displaced people, political instability, political terror scale, impact of terrorism, number of homicides, level of violent crime, violent demonstrations, jailed population, number of internal security officers and police.

crime rates, minimal terrorist activity and violence, calm geopolitical relationships, a stable political landscape, and a small proportion of displaced population can equate to peacefulness. Finally, six further indicators¹⁸⁹ relate to a country's level of Militarization, identifying the link between a country's level of military build-up and access to weapons and its level of domestic and international peacefulness. Each indicator is assessed with a value ranging from 0 to 5, and a total mean of each grants every country a score, using the same range; the higher the score, the least peaceful a country is considered.

Observing the latest data¹⁹⁰, South Sudan currently ranks 156th out of the 163 countries considered in the index, thus demonstrating how the world's youngest country is one of the least peaceful ones in the whole world. In particular, South Sudan scores an overall value of 3,117 out of 5, which can be translated in the worst peacefulness cohort, according to the GPI. In the region of Sub-Saharan Africa, the only worst-performing country is the Democratic Republic of Congo, ranked 160th worldwide.

A breakdown of the aforementioned indicators helps us in understanding which facets of South Sudan's status are suggested to be the most critical, framing which of the three domains is the one where intervention is most needed. In an immediate observation, South Sudan ranks as the third worst country worldwide in the Safety and Security Domain, with a score of 3,833 out of 5, which is surpassed only by Afghanistan and Yemen. In the two other domains, South Sudan is not included in the five least peaceful countries, but it is interesting to note that Sudan is ranked in the least performing in the Ongoing Conflict domain, with obvious reflexes on the world's youngest state. Nevertheless, South Sudan is listed in the twenty worst-performing country in the Ongoing Domestic and International Conflict domain, with a score of 2,958 out of five, while its results in the Militarization domain do not appear as appalling as the others. Considering the individual indicators, South Sudan scores 5 out of 5 in the facets of access to small arms¹⁹¹, intensity of internal conflict, level of violent crime, political instability, political terror scale¹⁹², and number of refugees and internally displaced people¹⁹³. Furthermore, significantly appalling results are shown in the relationships with neighboring countries and the homicide rate, both attested as more than 4 out of

¹⁸⁹ Military expenditure, number of armed services personnel, volume of transfer of major conventional weapons, nuclear and heavy weapons capabilities, ease of access to small arms.

¹⁹⁰ Global Peace Index (2025).

¹⁹¹ See Chapter Three.

¹⁹² Gibney, M., Cornett, L., Wood, R., Haschke, P., Arnon, D., Pisanò, A. (2021). *The Political Terror Scale 1976-2019*. Date Retrieved, from the Political Terror Scale website: <http://www.politicalterroryscale.org>.

¹⁹³ Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Mid-Year Trends; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC).

five. In summation, thus, South Sudan does appear as one of the least peaceful countries on the planet, and thanks to the GPI analysis it is possible to understand the most impactful underlying dynamics.

In order to complete South Sudan's Global Peace Index analysis, it could be useful to observe both the past results, giving a broader view of the country's trends in terms of peacefulness, and most importantly the future indications and projections that the index gives, in light of the possible exacerbation of the civil war in the country.

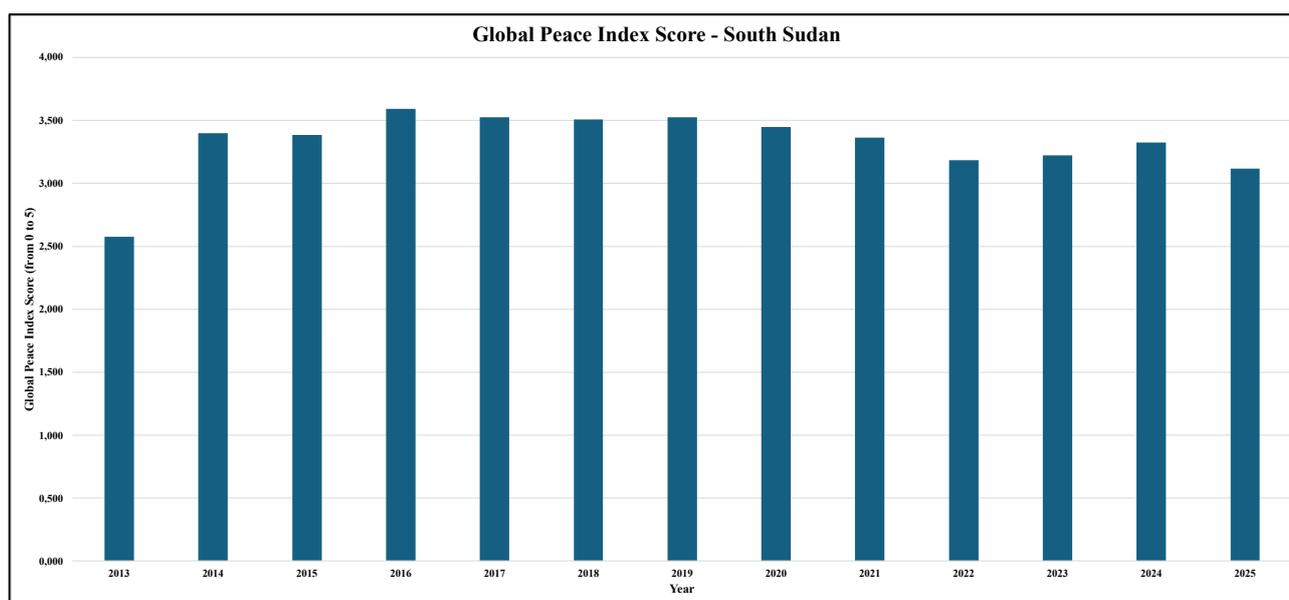


Figure 5.1 (Global Peace Index Score, 2013-2025)

Observing the data gathered from 2013¹⁹⁴, the first year in which South Sudan was included in the analysis, it is immediately observable how the country has never obtained a score under the threshold of 2,5 out of 5. Most importantly, 2013 is the only year in which South Sudan's score was attested under 3 out of 5, highlighting once again the extremely dire situation in which the country has found itself from the very beginning of its existence. As imaginable, scores have been extremely high in the entire considered timespan, with marginal fluctuations observable in conjunction with the periods of signing of the peace agreements. It is thus scarcely imaginable that the situation will encounter an amelioration in the short period, especially due to the last analyzed element in the Global Peace index report on South Sudan.

As a matter of fact, an extremely relevant feature of the 2025 Global Peace Index Report is the dedicated analysis to South Sudan as a potential conflict escalation hotspot, since the risk of a

¹⁹⁴ See Figure 4.1

renewed civil war in the current year has increased, due to the collapse of the Revitalized Agreement for Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), leading to a resurgence of widespread hostilities and a severe political crisis. In fact, repeated violations of the peace accord by signatory parties and a notable escalation in armed conflict across the states of Upper Nile, Western Bahr el-Ghazal, Western Equatoria, Unity, and Jonglei indicate a systematic nature of violence and military confrontations, which often result in civilian casualties. The renewed conflict has precipitated a humanitarian crisis; more than 125.000 people have been displaced since March 2025 due to armed clashes and aerial bombardments, adding to existing large, displaced populations. An estimated 9.3 million people, nearly three quarters of South Sudan's population, require humanitarian assistance in 2025, with 7.7 million facing acute food insecurity. Moreover, the situation is aggravated by the political deadlock which characterizes South Sudan; high-rank opposition members continue to be detained, stopping the power-sharing mechanism central to the R-ARCSS, as demonstrated by the postponement of national elections. The likelihood of further conflict escalation in South Sudan throughout 2025 is high, mainly due to the confluence of unresolved political grievances stemming from the R-ARCSS's collapse, active ethnic mobilization, intense elite competition for resources, particularly oil revenues, and significant external interference. The war in neighboring Sudan has in turn exacerbated the situation through an influx of weapons and combatants, and the involvement of both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in South Sudan. The nation's economic collapse has been primarily driven by disruptions to oil exports; there has been almost a complete cessation of oil moving through Sudanese pipelines for export as a result of the war. The government's inability to pay salaries, coupled with hyperinflation and soaring food prices, fuels widespread discontent and desperation among both the civilian population and security forces.

Conflict Escalation Variable	Present?
Urban origin onset	No
Accessible terrain	No
High logistical supply	No
Non-state actor heavy weapons	No
Significant external support	Yes
Private military contractors	No
High levels of ethnic exclusion	Yes
Fratricidal coercion	No
Conflict instrumentalisation	Yes

Figure 4.2 (Reasons for Escalation of Conflict in South Sudan, Global Peace Index 2025)

According to the Global Peace Index, the three factors which contribute to the escalation of conflict are to be identified in the significant external support, the high levels of ethnic inclusion, and the conflict instrumentalization¹⁹⁵. Thus, the GPI analysis appears to be a useful test to the hypothesis of the present work, as it points at a potential correlation between the reactivation of hostile activities and both demographic reasons (related to ethnicity frictions) and the presence of external actors, mainly moved by economic interests revolving around the country's natural resources availability. In the breakdown of the analysis, clashes in South Sudan are identified as widespread, and the difficulties of conclusive military operations is attributed to the challenging physical geography conformation of the country. Both warring parties still face severe logistical constraints, a factor that shapes the nature of the conflict and heightens escalation risks. The statal army, despite having access to state resources, is hampered by the nation's economic collapse and dwindling oil revenues, which impacts its ability to pay forces and maintain equipment, notwithstanding the possession of heavy weaponry. On the other hand, the SPLA-IO's logistical situation is marked by chronic shortages of ammunition, fuel, food and medical supplies. These mutual logistical weaknesses prevent either side from mounting sustained, large-scale conventional campaigns, contributing instead to a low-intensity, high-impact conflict characterized by continuous clashes, raids for resources and prolonged instability, thereby increasing the risk of continued escalation. As anticipated, external military support is identified as a significant driver of conflict dynamics and escalation potential in South Sudan, mainly due to the efforts produced by The Uganda People's Defense Force (UPDF) to support the government and secure Juba directly, bolstering its military capabilities, and the spillover effects that Sudan's civil is producing. At the same time, ethnic exclusion remains a potent and central driver of conflict escalation in South Sudan in 2025. The primary political fault lines, as said, are deeply intertwined with the Dinka and Nuer ethnic identities. Incidents such as military operations in Nuer-majority areas and the prominence of ethnic militias like the Nuer White Army in recent clashes highlight the ethnic dimension of the violence. Thus, it is safe to say that exclusion is not a mere byproduct of the ongoing conflict, but rather an organizing principle of it, heightening the probability of sustained, identity-based escalation. Finally, the conflict in South Sudan is profoundly shaped by the way political and military elites instrumentalize it to control and distribute power and resources. The military, in fact, works through a large and complicated patronage system, where loyalty is often tied to access to resources, and the current escalation can be largely understood as a violent renegotiation of the elite pact governing this resource distribution. The collapse of the R-ARCSS has removed the political framework for power-sharing, creating a vacuum exploited by factions using force to secure or expand their control over state institutions and obtain economic benefits. The severe

¹⁹⁵ See Figure 4.2

economic crisis, triggered by disruptions in oil production and its export, has intensified this struggle, as the pool of resources available for patronage has shrunk, thereby increasing the stakes for elites and their willingness to resort to violence to maintain or enhance their positions. This instrumentalization renders the conflict not solely ethnic in its nature but also centered on struggles over power, wealth, and availability of resources. With a civilian population already suffering from food shortages, thus, the ongoing consequences of the conflict could be devastating.

In summation, the framework provided by the Global Peace Index demonstrates once again the extreme proneness to conflict that South Sudan had to endure since the country's birth. More importantly, the possibilities of a conflict escalation to this day are more than concrete, and the analysis seems to include the variables that this work involve. As a matter of fact, conflict in South Sudan is possibly still shaped by both demographic factors, principally related to the country's fragmented ethnic mosaic, for which to this day policymakers have not found an agreed governmental solution, and by dynamics profoundly intertwined with the fight for natural resources (mainly oil), which consequently draw a high volume of attention by international players. Thus, according to the GPI, the parenthesis of conflict in South Sudan is far from being solved, hindering the aforementioned possibilities for development that the country's demographic, economic, and social situation could, if managed properly, achieve. In order to grasp the correct cause-effect correlation which intertwines the considered variables, it is key to observe the results produced by a second fundamentally recognized index.

4.2 THE FRAGILE STATES INDEX

The Fragile States Index (FSI), published yearly by the Fund For Peace (FFP), is a measure based on a conflict assessment framework, denominated CAST, which aims at assessing the vulnerability of states to collapse. This set of indicators, widely used by policymakers, community networks, and governmental practitioners, implies the use of both qualitative and quantitative indicators, alongside public source data, in order to produce quantifiable results. Each state's condition is examined at any given moment using twelve different indicators, which provide snapshots both at a given instant and in a time series, useful to understand if a state's condition is worsening or improving. The indicators are divided into four domains, helping to understand the condition of a state in every aspect of its life: the FSI, in fact, analyses a state's condition through the Cohesion, Economic, Political, and Social domains.

The Cohesion domain consists of three indicators. The first one, denominated Security Apparatus, considers the security threats to a state, including state-sponsored or state-supported private militias. In other cases, the Security Apparatus of a state can include a form of deep state, consisting of secret intelligence units, or other irregular security forces, that serve the interests of a political leader. Secondly, the Factionalized Elites indicator considers the fragmentation of state institutions along ethnic, class, clan, racial or religious lines, factorizing the use of nationalistic political rhetoric by ruling elites in terms of nationalism and xenophobia. In extreme situations, it can be representative of the absence of legitimate leadership widely accepted as representing the entire citizenry. The Factionalized Elites indicator thus measures power struggles, political competition, political transitions, and where elections occur will factor in the credibility of electoral processes. Finally, the Group Grievance Indicator focuses on divisions and schisms between different groups in society, mainly based on social or political characteristics, and their role in access to services or resources, and inclusion in the political process. Group Grievance may also have a historical component, where aggrieved communal groups cite injustices of the past that influence that group's role in society and relationships with other groups. Groups may also feel aggrieved because they are denied autonomy, self-determination or political independence to which they believe they are entitled. The Indicator also considers where specific groups are singled out by state authorities, or by dominant groups, for persecution or repression.

The first indicator which composes the Economic domain is Economic Decline and Poverty, which considers factors related to a country's economic difficulties (per capita income, GNP, unemployment rates, inflation, poverty levels). It further analyses the responses to dire economic conditions and their consequences on a social level, and focuses on illicit trade in drugs, human trafficking, corruption, and smuggling. The Uneven Economic Development indicator considers both actual and perceived inequality within a state's economy, irrespective of its real performance, based on group, educational, economic, and regional disparities. Naturally, such indicator sustains that economic differences may foster communal tensions or nationalistic rhetorics. Finally, the Human Flight and Brain Drain considers the economic impact of human displacement and its consequences on a country's development, both in cases of forced and voluntary displacement.

The Political domain is firstly determined by the State Legitimacy indicator, considering the representativeness and openness of a government and its relationship with its citizenry, alongside the population's level of confidence in state institutions and processes. It also entails the integrity of elections, the nature of political transitions, and the openness of ruling elites and their transparency,

accountability, and political representation. Furthermore, the Public Services Indicator refers to the presence of basic state functions that serve the people, such as essential services (health, education, sanitation), and the state's ability to protect its citizens. The indicator also investigates to whom such services are referred. Finally, the Human Rights and Rule of Law indicator considers the relationship between the state and its population insofar as fundamental human rights are protected and freedoms are observed and respected.

Lastly, the Social domain principally revolves around the Demographic Pressures indicator, which considers pressures upon the state deriving from the population itself, with regards to food supply, access to basic services and resources, or health. It also includes the main demographic factors, such as population growth, youth bulges, and a state's age structure, recognizing their effects on the social, political, and economic tissue. Moreover, the indicator also considers pressures stemming from extreme weather events, alongside environmental hazards. Secondly, the Refugees and IDPs indicator measures the pressure upon states caused by the forced displacement of large communities as a result of social, political, environmental, or other causes, considering the state's capability to absorb influxes of refugees into its society. Finally, the External Intervention indicator considers the impact and influence of external actors in the functioning of a state, mainly from an economic and security perspective. It also includes humanitarian interventions and the behavior of international organizations.

In order to construct the index, each indicator is assigned a score from 0 to 10, with a higher score representing more fragility; in this sense, countries are organized and listed from the most fragile to the most stable, with split results to showcase the performance in each domain.

In relation to the current performance of South Sudan¹⁹⁶, the country ranks third worldwide in the list of the most fragile states, depicting once again an extremely dire situation. South Sudan, in fact, has obtained a score of 109 out of 112, showcasing enormous lacks in each of the four domains. In particular, the world's youngest country has registered a score of 10 in the Security Apparatus and Refugees and IDPs indicators, while bordering the same result in the State Legitimacy, Public Services, and Demographic Pressures indicators. Overall, the worst-performing domain is the Social one, with a mean score of 9,7 for the three indicators; thus, the FSI seems to attribute the majority of the country's problems to both its demographic dynamics and the external intervention, even though scores remain extremely high in any other sector.

¹⁹⁶ <https://fragilestatesindex.org/country-data/>

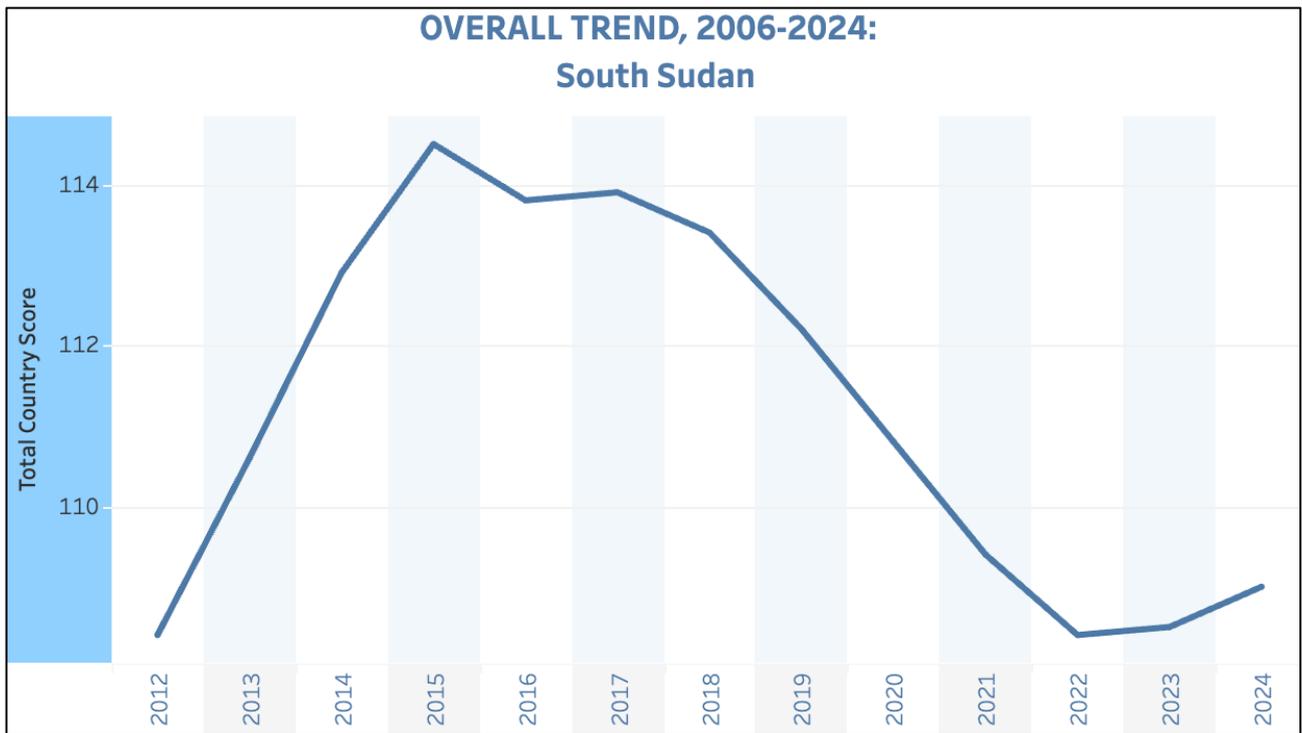


Figure 4.3 (Fragile State Index South Sudan, 2013-2024)

Observing the time series of South Sudan’s FSI scores from 2012 to this day,¹⁹⁷ the results showcase a progressive improvement of the country’s scores in the period between 2015 and 2022, anticipated by a skyrocketing rise between 2012 and 2015. Nevertheless, the fact that South Sudan has never positioned itself in a better position than fourth worldwide simply demonstrates that the global trend in the Fragile States Index has encountered a general amelioration. The analysis of the individual indicators seems to depict a trend similar to the general one, with no outlier or particularly relevant indicator behavior over time. Nevertheless, the two worst-performing domains have always remained the Cohesion and the Social ones, demonstrating how, apparently, the two main reasons for South Sudan’s everlasting state of fragility are to be found in its failure to provide state security, especially due to the ethnic disparities which still to this day characterize the country, and its most pressing demographic issues, mainly related to social fragmentation, youth bulge, and population increase. Furthermore, the relevance of external intervention in contributing to South Sudan’s fragility appears to be a possible enhancing element, paired with the constant appalling condition of refugees and IDPs, the main cause for such dire results.

¹⁹⁷ See Figure 4.3

In summation, the Fragile States Index seems to highlight South Sudan's demographic dynamics (and consequent pressures), alongside external intervention and the ever-present ethnic difficulties that the country has to face, as some of the drivers of its condition of fragility, which does not seem to be encountering any amelioration in comparison to the world's general situation. Finally, the analysis will be concluded with the observation of the last index, primarily focused on the current and future situation of conflict worldwide.

4.3 THE ACLED CONFLICT INDEX

The last observed indicator to conclude the present analysis on conflict in South Sudan is the ACLED Conflict Index¹⁹⁸, a measure that calculates where conflicts in every country and territory tend to outbreak. The index uses four indicators to measure conflict levels: deadliness (number of fatalities), danger to civilians (how many political violence events are targeted towards civilians), diffusion (what proportion of the country is invested by violence), and fragmentation (how many armed groups are operating within the conflict). Through the use of political violence data, the ACLED Conflict Index assigns each country a score for any indicator, categorizing states between those experiencing extreme, high, or turbulent levels of conflict. Thus, in general, the ACLED Conflict Index tries to determine the general level of conflict spread worldwide, its geographical collocation, and trends about the global diffusion of conflict.

According to the 2024 report, South Sudan ranks 25th worldwide in the ACLED scale, representing one of the countries experiencing a high level of conflict. Notwithstanding the surprisingly relatively elevated score, the condition of conflict in the country is described as worsening, in accordance with what has been analyzed in the Global Peace Index. Observing the breakdown of the results, South Sudan's conflicts rank 18th in Deadliness, 30th in Diffusion, 21st in Danger, and 33rd in Fragmentation considering every country worldwide. Thus, according to the immediate interpretation of the results, the country's situation appears dire especially in relation to the number of casualties and the involvement of civilians within the hostilities, in accordance with what has been mentioned and forecast in the previous paragraphs.

Due to the incredible recency of this measure, the only chronological comparison can be set with the 2023 results, the year of foundation of the ACLED Conflict Index. Two years ago, South Sudan ranked 31st worldwide, with its level of experienced conflict set on turbulent; thus, according

¹⁹⁸ <https://acleddata.com/>

to the measure, South Sudan has encountered a significant worsening of its conflict situation, due to the high possibilities of a renewed escalation of hostilities. In relation to future developments, on the other hand, the ACLED Conflict Index does not present South Sudan as one of the five most endangered countries, according to the 2025 Conflict Watchlist¹⁹⁹, while neighboring Sudan is highlighted as one of the major countries to which attention must be paid. Consequently, it is possible that a significant spillover effect of renewed hostilities in Sudan might impact its southern neighbor, especially in light of the military involvement between the two countries, the belligerent nature of border territories, and the elevated number of displaced South Sudanese within Sudanese territory.

In summation, the analysis of three globally recognized indexes has demonstrated South Sudan's appalling condition in terms of stability, proneness to conflict, and future outlooks. Moreover, after testing the potential correlation between the aforementioned variables, it is possible that demographic dynamics, scarcity and fight for natural resources, and external intervention related to economic interest sit within the potential catalysts for the country's conflictual nature. Naturally, it is always fundamental to state that this work does not exhaust the issue's depth, given the enormous complexity of the entire framework. In the conclusive section of this thesis, the results will be summarized, finally trying to determine which future awaits South Sudan, and how its institutions should behave in order to turn the favors of an obscure and potentially devastating future.

¹⁹⁹ <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2025/#1675782494429-c4ac65a5-ceb1>

CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of the present analysis, a thorough investigation of the past, current, and future condition of South Sudan has been conducted, in order to grasp a correct understanding of its scenarios regarding demographic processes, competition for the availability of natural resources, and the country's proneness to violence and conflict. The goal of this work was to determine the extent to which causalities and correlations can be observed between the variables of demographic change, mainly expressed through the facets of population change and Youth Bulge, competition for natural resources, intended as the fight over access, distribution, and control of water, oil, and livelihood-critical supplementary elements, and exacerbation of internal conflicts in South Sudan, observing a time frame comprised between 2011, the year of birth of the world's youngest state, and 2035, forecasting the situation which the possible interplay of the three variables would produce ten years into the future. Through the employment and integration of quantitative data, qualitative assessment, and theoretical frameworks, this investigation has highlighted patterns of causality and correlation between the three variables, which also appear to showcase dynamics of reciprocal reinforcement. As a matter of fact, the retrieved data and the subsequent analysis depict a scenario in which demographic processes in South Sudan seem to have an influence over the competition for the access to natural resources which, in turn, exacerbate the likelihood and intensity of internal conflicts within the country. Nevertheless, the importance of supplementary mechanisms such as governance capacity, institutional weakness, and external interference in shaping the observed outcome should be extensively considered, given that the interplay between the three observed variables is not *per se* sufficient to sustain a clear and univocal causal chain.

The demographic reality of South Sudan depicts a bifurcated scenario, characterized by high fertility rates, an extremely young median age, and an elevated age dependency ratio; nevertheless, these dimensions are undergoing a slow but steady improvement, implying both opportunities and risks for the country. After 2035, South Sudan could approach the Demographic Window of Opportunity and potentially gain the Demographic Dividend, but such condition could only be achieved under conditions of political stability, economic diversification, and investment on human capital. In fact, if the necessary provisions are not enacted, the country is going to suffer from its peculiar demography, translating its large youth cohort into a reason for instability and turmoil, especially in the current and expected absence of governmental solidity and adequate work prospects. Skyrocketing demographic growth, paired with the existence of a sedimented Youth Bulge, could in

fact enormously impact the country's future stability, jeopardizing the possible positive outcomes of a delicate situation, which desperately calls for adequate management.

A similar discourse applies to natural resources, which remain a vital element of South Sudan's socio-economic framework. The distribution and administration of oil, water, and land, alongside the inadequate management of the deriving revenues, still represent to this day an issue of the utmost importance for the country, which should be enduring a firm shift towards the realization of its industries' enormous untapped potential. Furthermore, this frustrating scenario is exacerbated by the considerable demographic pressure applied on the entire system; the competition between ethnic groups and communities has always been an element of disturbance for South Sudan's resources (especially water and cattle), and if the issue of social fragmentation is not correctly tackled, the already worsening damages that rivalries and raids are producing could only result in an escalation of violence, increasing the unbearable burden on a tormented civilian population. Moreover, the exacerbation of ethnic differences, paired with well-sedimented tribal heritages, customary institutions, and a substantial lack of governmental power, eventually leads to contestations of authority over the possession of natural resources, flowing into scenarios of tension and contrast. On top of the social and demographic risks, the climatic challenges that South Sudan have always endured appear to be encountering a serious worsening, with recurring floods, droughts, and extreme climatic events hindering any possible amelioration, which presupposes concrete and precise forecasting and risk management policies.

Finally, the development of this work and the employment of the stability indexes analyzed in Chapter Four clarified the presence of both demographic processes (mainly relative to population change and Youth Bulge) and resource-related disputes as drivers and catalysts for internal violence. As a matter of fact, the investigation of the numerous civil wars and intestine conflicts that South Sudan has endured over the decades, alongside the immeasurable difficulties in the enforcement and stabilization of the peace agreements that followed the cessation of hostile activities, have demonstrated how population structure, the vast presence of unemployed and disillusioned youth which feel a more pressing sense of belonging to their tribe, ethnic group, or family rather than to their own nation do represent a substantial element of distress for the country's peace and equilibrium. Moreover, the interplay between this intricated, fragmented, and still evolving demographic framework, weak governmental institutions, and strong competition over natural resources have all coalesced to undermine any attempt to a functional and solid nation-building in South Sudan. In completion to such a devastated scenario, the individual and collective behavior of external actors

relatively to the matter showcased a situation of complete appalment, in which any invested country or organization decided to set South Sudan's stability aside, in favor of economic interests, commercial ties, protection of personal returns, or even caution in the attempt of not getting excessively involved in a profoundly compromised situation. As a result, both the South Sudanese government and civilian population have grown a progressively consolidated mistrustful towards the majority of entities which have crossed their path with South Sudan, always treated with carelessness and sufficiency, left alone in its trail to reconstruction and national identity.

Additionally, the observation of South Sudan's situation in the near future helps tracing an ideal and hypothetical way ahead for the country, given that in absence of significant political, institutional, and infrastructural reforms, the interplay between the three variables will probably continue to thwart any virtuous development towards sustainable peace and stability for the country. As a matter of fact, the South Sudanese government should intervene in a precise and thorough manner to tackle and solve plagues which have riddled the country since its birth, jamming the negative mechanism that the spiral of conflict and violence continues to bestow upon South Sudan. In particular, extended policies of demographic management must be prioritized, directing consistent investments towards education, healthcare, family planning, and employment strategies for the youth population, which could still flourish into an immeasurable source of wellness and economic production. In this sense, ethnic and social fragmentation shall be overcome through an overall inclusive listening, involvement, and treatment of different communities, in order to establish a common direction, useful to unhinge a consolidated system of tribal heritage which further hinders trust towards the official government, and the latter's authority over the population. Secondly, South Sudan's future depends on the correct assessment of the issue of resource governance, which is still to this day constellated by corruption, elitism, and malpractice. Systemic corruption and mismanagement in the extractive industries have until now undermined efforts to harness natural resources for the benefit of the broader population, thus a major reform of resource management is to be considered a primary element on the country's present and near future agenda, promoting and ensuring a transparent, fair, and sustainable mechanism to protect and virtuously administrate South Sudan's natural richness. Moreover, the country needs to diversify its resources economy, transitioning from its dependence on fossil fuel use and revenues, fostering virtuous production chains and creating long-term prosperity and stability. Finally, a comprehensive strengthening and refoundation of the country's conflict prevention policies should complete the framework of South Sudan's policy recommendations. The country's persistent and atavistic instability, showcased in this work by the observed indexes, must be rapidly and thoroughly addressed, integrating peacebuilding

into development plannings and, most of all, tackling the structural causes of the turmoil which have emerged from this analysis.

In conclusion, this work has suggested the presence of a solid but extremely complex interplay between demographic processes, availability of natural resources, and the enhancement of internal conflicts in South Sudan, trying to shed a light on the causalities and reciprocal effects that these variables have and will continue to produce in the timespan between 2011 and 2035. The country's stability, which has until now only been represented by sporadic and fragile moments of relative peace between civil wars and widespread conflict, depends on the ability of every involved actor, entity, and institution to catalyze South Sudan's inherent richness, both from a natural resource and a demographic momentum standpoint. If the correct policies are implemented and the most pressing issues are tackled properly, safeguarding the principles of equity, transparency, and inclusion, the country could be set on a trajectory of growth and lasting peace. On the other hand, if the constant immobility and impotence towards the observed cycle of fragility remain, the chain of negative externalities which intertwine demographic dynamics, competition over natural resources, and the continuance of internal conflicts will remain unbroken, materializing an even more obscure future of instability for the South Sudanese civilian population, which still yearn for the mirage of durable and stable peace.

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