

Intro from the home page/news section

South Sudan has been immersed in conflict for at least four of the last six decades and is prone to environmental shocks including floods, locusts and drought, making it one of the most fragile countries in the world. One casualty of conflict, political upheaval and environmental shocks is the population's access to reliable and safe sources of water. Much of the water infrastructure in the country is defunct or obsolete. Many attempts at water system management by both government and the aid sector have struggled with issues of sustainability.

This new research evidences the crucial role of traditional and customary institutions – such as the role played by chiefs – in the management of water resources and the resolution of disputes over natural resources. These traditional roles have often been overlooked by government policy and development projects. The study recommends ways to improve water management in South Sudan, namely by acknowledging and understanding the role of different institutions..

The report demonstrates a paradox in the role of women and girls in particular, who are entirely responsible for water collection and often experience sexual violence when travelling long distances to collect water, yet have limited influence on local decision-making in a strongly patriarchal society. The research demonstrates that when women are given authority over water management and can speak freely in safe spaces, there is more equitable access to water and less conflict.

(Links to a page with a longer summary and an option to download the full report)

Extended summary for the report landing page/ or this could be a 4 page downloadable brief which summarises the report

The relationship between water and conflict in South Sudan is complex. Water is both a driver of conflict and a catalyst for peace.

Context

Drinking water in South Sudan mainly comes from groundwater reserves, which are abundantly but unevenly distributed, with less than 5% of available freshwater being withdrawn, well below the 25% benchmark that would indicate a country suffered 'water stress'. The problem is that successive civil wars have destroyed water infrastructure or forced communities to abandon them.

Less than half of the population have access to basic drinking water and the situation has not improved since independence in 2011 despite substantial investments by aid organisations. The destruction of water infrastructure has increased dependence on unprotected water resources, such as rivers, ponds and open wells causing regular outbreaks of waterborne diseases, including cholera, diarrhoea and Guinea worm.

Women and girls have the burden of travelling long distances to collect water and during these journeys are at high risk of sexual assault (the risk of sexual assault is four times higher than anywhere else in the world).

Water access is not only a victim of war but also a contributing factor in ongoing violent conflict. Armed groups and the military often sabotage water supplies and pastoralist groups compete violently for water, especially during the height of the dry season, the duration of which is increasing because of climate change.

The fledgling government of South Sudan and its partners face a formidable challenge of providing water against a backdrop of obsolete infrastructure. Addressing this challenge is critical for both the wellbeing of the South Sudanese population and for peace-building and mitigating the increasing intensity and armament of tribal conflict.

New Findings

- There is strong consensus that water is a major driver of conflict in South Sudan with more than 80% of interviewees identifying this as a major concern.
- Conflict fluctuates seasonally, but even in the relatively calm season, 38% of people still worry about safety of the person in their family collecting water often or sometimes.
- In a fragile context, where government systems are weak, non-existent or not trusted, traditional and customary authorities – such as the role of chiefs in decision making - are essential to the governance and management of water supplies and ensuring water for all.
- The role of women in water management is a responsibility without authority. Women and female youth have responsibility for all water collection and often take over day to day management of water supplies when committees collapse, but are excluded from decision making in a patriarchal society and rarely have a voice in customary institutions.
- Women pay a high price for collecting water in South Sudan with incidents of rape and domestic violence frequently linked to water collection. Left out of decisions on locations for water pumps, women often fetch water from rivers far away from their village, increasing the risk of them being attacked.
- There is almost universal recognition that women have primary responsibility for managing domestic water, care about it and are better at it than men.

Lessons to be learned to improve sustainability of water management investments

Significant lessons can be learned from past attempts to manage water supplies by both the government and aid organisations. Without the skills and subsidies to continue the management of operations, without legitimacy or trust of communities, water supplies may be developed, but will not be maintained or sustained.

It is common practice for NGOs is to develop water supplies then leave it to the community to manage. But the funding for maintenance is not sufficient for buying spare parts, and water management committees have limited time to commit to operation and maintenance because their priority is survival for their households.

The small team remaining in one rural water department of South Sudan's Ministry of Water reported that they have not had any allocated budget for water sector activities since 2013. One survey participant in Rumbek said: *"There are over 2036 boreholes and water yards across Lakes State and not even half of these are working"*.

The study finds that models imported from other countries do not work in this context. Policies devised in a vacuum, which do not consider the importance of traditional structures, will remain unpopular. Therein lies the opportunity for tapping into the legitimacy and authority of traditional structures, which have nuanced differences in urban settings and are particularly powerful in rural settings.

Traditional structures offer an opportunity

Elected, appointed or hereditary chiefs play a pivotal role in local justice and conflict resolution in South Sudan— almost 90% of everyday criminal and civil cases are dealt with and executed under customary law.

Some chiefs are hereditary, others are elected or nominated, some have spiritual authority, and there are many other forms of authority who are not 'chiefs', such as cattle camp leaders and clan elders. These nuances must be clearly understood, something which is overlooked in much of the literature on this topic.

Crucially, overall, chiefs are the last resort to raise funds to repair water points when they break. Funds are typically raised from community contributions, businessmen with links to the community and NGOs. Chiefs and their supporting customary institutions are also responsible for enforcing by-laws agreed for improved water supply.

Although the influence of traditional institutions was said to be dwindling, in the absence of a publicly legitimate and strong formal water sector, they are likely to continue to play an important role in water governance and management in South Sudan, especially in rural areas. They must therefore be understood, accounted for, and worked with when designing and implementing water interventions.

In comparison, formal institutions have much less credibility due to mistrust and mixed loyalties in the complexity of the conflict, for example, one expert explained that 'the presence of soldiers at the water points makes many people fear going to the water facility.'

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With men largely absent, fighting in the civil war, women assumed critical roles within communities and, at a political level. They have also played important roles in peacebuilding. Nevertheless, women continue to be burdened with highly gendered roles and responsibilities (including water collection); underrepresented in state and community leadership; face restrictions from participating in community institutions; have high illiteracy rates; and often experience early and forced marriage.

Findings from a previous study by the Rift Valley Institute support this: women are part of water management committees but their 'participation is low, [and] they don't talk in front of men'. Yet anecdotal evidence points out that when women and youth have been included in community-based projects, they have had a positive impact on reducing disputes and violence and harnessing opportunities for socioeconomic growth.

Gender specific findings

- In all 14 focus groups there was a clear gender division in water collection with women and girls responsible for household water and men and boys responsible for livestock water.
- There was almost universal agreement amongst water users that women are the best managers of water. This is not just within their traditional role in household water collection and use, but also in management of community water supplies and handling of finances.

- Decisions about locations of new water supplies are usually made by traditional or customary institutions without involvement of women. Considerations such as security for women are therefore not given priority
- Despite rarely being given a formal role when water management committees are formed, throughout this study, women were reported to be actively working together to keep water supplies operational, even when the official committee had failed.
- In some areas women are successfully working as pump mechanics (though UNICEF reported that 80% are still men).
- The main barriers to women's participation in water management are culture, education and workload.
- Despite these barriers, there was a sense that women stick at it longer than men or youth and follow up (with leaders and/or local government), which is critical to maintain momentum.

Incidents of rape and domestic violence are frequently linked to water collection, although these events are usually not reported.

For young women, water points are used as a target for young men to obtain wives. Following a rape, a young man may demand that the family gives the girl to him. Women reported using a number of coping strategies to reduce the risks of collecting water from faraway sources, including: going out in large groups; avoiding nightly water collection; and sharing information on the best times and access points for water collection.

There are some positives from going to a communal point to collect water. Girls appreciate the opportunity to meet other girls and exchange news, gossip and make friends. Women feel time at the water point is time away from household chores and enjoy socialising. They conduct most of their meetings under the 'borehole tree', which is how they are able to meet and share experiences and support each other.

Recommendations

- A hybrid model for water management, involving chiefs and traditional leaders, specifically working to involve women in decision making, will lead to more equitable access to water and reduce conflict and SGBV.
- Customary authorities should continue to be responsible for governance of water but could, where possible, delegate the management of water supplies to women, preferably in a women's group rather than a mixed committee of men and women. This delegation should come from the customary institutions rather than NGOs so that women have the authority to act and are provided with security to do the work.
- Levels of SGBV around water collection are extreme and women need to have more say in where water points are located, how safety and security is managed and express their views on maintenance and repair needs. There could be opportunities to build on the idea of a 'Borehole Tree Meeting', which mirrors the 'Big Tree Meetings' used by many customary authorities for decision making. This could be a more structured way for women to be able to discuss these issues and present their views to the customary institutions.

The research demonstrates that when women are given authority over water management and can speak freely in safe spaces, there is more equitable access to water and less conflict.

Methodology

The research was conducted in three locations in South Sudan in 2021 in: Juba county, Central Equatoria; Kapoeta county, Eastern Equatoria and Rumbek Central county, Lakes. 14 focus groups were divided by gender and, where possible, by age, which helped to uncover marginalized viewpoints, which may have been overshadowed in mixed groups. 24 expert key informant interviews were conducted. Qualitative analysis of interview transcripts was combined with quantitative analysis of data from expert elicitation and ranking/scoring exercises completed by focus group participants.