



Farmers on a maize plantation Photo Credit: Source IFDC

South Sudan eyes wealth in agriculture as oil wells run dry

By Richard Sultan

IN August, Ijjo Justin, quit work with a private security company that deployed him at a Juba hotel. He bought a used motorbike for US\$400 and planned to ride to Arinya, more than 100 miles from South Sudan's capital city. Ijjo planned to ferry anything he could salvage from a family plantation, abandoned when communal fights displaced thousands of families, including his.

"It is not safe," Amoyi Mathew, an elderly foreman who leads weekly harvest treks to Arinya warned him. "We all live here in Upari, but go there two days before the market day on Saturday. We organise and go in

groups, sleep in one place, and come back together on Saturday morning."

Heeding Amoyi's caution, Ijjo rather than proceed to Arinya bought cassava and tomatoes at Upari and rode back to Juba to resell. "My mum was still worried for my safety after I explained everything to her, but deep down, I had made up my mind on my next move," says Ijjo.

The mother lives with Ijjo in Juba, where Ijjo relocated her, alongside his six-year-old son, whom he withdrew from school, and his wife.

The following Wednesday, Ijjo left Juba in the morning, reaching Upari in the afternoon. He spent the night at Amoyi's homestead.

On Thursday, Amoyi led a group of eight men trekking to Ijjo's village where they converged under a leafy tree near a stream, their home for the next two nights. Here, Amoyi issued orders, such as when they would converge for lunch, before each man headed to his garden. Ijjo ran straight to his farm and uprooted cassava until lunch time. Then he peeled the cassava and spread it on the ground for sun drying over the coming days. The group trekked back to Upari Saturday morning, where Ijjo bought tomatoes and peas for re-sale in Juba.

Like Ijjo and his group, many displaced farmers are braving the security risks caused by communal conflicts to eke out a living from agriculture.

To inspire the citizens, South Sudan's President Salva Kiir is leading by example and encouraging everyone to engage in agricultural activities. On a recent routine visit to inspect his vast rice and maize plantation farm in Luri in the city's outskirts, the President appreciated the efforts of people like Ijjo who are heeding his call.

"This is the rice plantation; some plantations are ready for harvest. If every household across the country does this, we would have sufficient food and not be complaining of food shortage and hunger. I encourage every household to do something productive and innovative for themselves," said the President.

The World Bank in its latest economic analysis for South Sudan highlights the need for the country to leverage its natural capital in the agriculture and oil sectors to support recovery and resilience.

"South Sudan's chronic food insecurity could be reversed with targeted investments to improve the resilience of the agricultural sector," said Joseph Mawejje, World Bank Country Economist for South Sudan.

The World Bank report comes against the backdrop of a new reality that is starting to dawn on the country's leaders; some of the oil wells are expected to run dry in a few years. Barring the discovery of new wells, the country could also start to invest in the most likely alternative industry – agriculture – given its massive land mass.

"There are several factors as to why the production levels keep reducing, but the most serious one is the natural decline at an annual rate of 20% in Block 1, 2, and 4, where production started in 1997 and 1999, respectively. This means if these

blocks produce 100,000 barrels a day this year, next year it will reduce to 80,000 simply because the reserves get depleted," former Petroleum Minister and undersecretary Awou Daniel Chuang said.

Deputy minister for agriculture and food security, Lily Albino Akol Akol, said there are several constraints to South Sudan's agriculture, notably a shortage of seeds, erratic rainfall and lack of agricultural tools.

"Despite all these challenges, the most urgent need to transform the agricultural sector is access to finance. None of the banking institutions in the country give out loans for agricultural purposes and this is what needs to be fixed," she told a recent forum organised by the World Bank.

South Sudan's minister of agriculture and food security, Josephine Lagu, believes the key to agricultural transformation is fully implementing the country's revitalised peace agreement. Easing conflict, she says, will enable more money to be diverted from security to agriculture.

"We want farmers, families, organised groups, and churches to get involved in food production so we can stop importing food."

Policy analyst James Boboya agrees with the World Bank on the proposal to channelling oil profits to support agriculture.

"The way to go," he said, "is for the government of South Sudan to tarmac the road to agriculture-producing areas such as Yei, Yambio, and Eastern Equatoria so that farmers can bring products to market."

However, all stakeholders agree that lasting peace remains key to transforming agriculture in a country where civil strife keeps recurring since independence in 2011.

Agricultural Fact

In spite of having 50% of its arable land mass as prime agricultural land only 4.0% of this area is cultivated continuously or periodically. The very low ratio of cultivated to total land compares with 28% in Kenya and 8.0% in Uganda. Most of this land use in South Sudan is accounted for by smallholder subsistence farmers that, in the absence of fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides, practise some form of shifting cultivation

Ongoing donor funded Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Projects pre-conflict. Source - Ministry of Finance & Economic Planning AIMS Database

	Budget allocation					Disbursement				
	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
Livestock	8 294	2 809	1 647	420	13 170	6 423	3 509	2 113	1 124	13 169
Fisheries	9 628	1 277	1 753	400	13 057	9 390	1 438	1 737	491	13 057
Forestry	5 984	400	800		7 184	4 197	2 187	800		7 184
Crops and other	77 056	61 738	13 708	6 334	158 836	52 872	58 427	41 203	6 334	158 836
Total	100 962	66 223	17 908	7 154	192 247	72 882	65 562	45 853	7 949	192 246

Land use in South Sudan. Source: World Bank

Category	Area	Share (%)
Cultivated Trees	2,760,131	4.3
Shrubs	20,742,243	32.6
Heraceous	25,032,308	39.3
Urban/Industrial	14,522,385	22.8
Bare rock & soil	34,188	0.1