**Food, Donors, and Dependency Syndrome(s) in South Sudan**

**ABSTRACT** This article investigates the deployment of dependency as a keyword in discussions of food security in South Sudan, on the basis of interviews and observations carried out in December 2012. Our initial intent was to estimate challenges to rural food security as the country emerged from decades of violent conflict. However, the notion of a “culture of dependency” arose persistently from our data, alongside more conventional information about food. We contextualize this discursive deployment of dependency within ongoing scholarly debates about the existence of “dependency syndromes” in humanitarian relief operations in central Africa and within academic discussions of the power of buzzwords and keywords in development discourse, with particular reference to Swidler and Watkins’s 2009 article “Teach a Man to Fish: The Doctrine of Sustainability and Its Effects on Three Strata of Malawian Society.” We argue that dependency in the South Sudanese context incorporates four facets: the near-total economic dependency of South Sudan on oil revenues; the social-structural dependency of rural communities on international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) for basic foodstuffs; a so-called “culture of dependency” that our informants claimed had taken root in rural areas, so that local people had lost old habits of autonomy and self-reliance; and the reliance of INGOs on the populations they serve. We do not empirically validate these “dependencies” but treat them as discursive constructs with potentially major implications for rural development.

**INTRODUCTION**

In this paper, we examine the idea of “dependency” as articulated in interviews with development actors in South Sudan. We argue that “the dependencies,” as our informants described them, incorporate three observable facets: the near-total economic dependency of South Sudan on oil revenues; the social-structural dependency of South Sudan as a nation on international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) for social welfare; and a so-called “culture of dependency” that our informants claimed had taken root in rural areas, so that local people had lost old habits of autonomy and self-reliance. Alongside these facets, we consider a fourth type of dependency: the reliance of some INGOs on the impoverished and hungry communities they serve. Our work picks up the lines of thought of ongoing scholarly debates about the existence of “dependency syndromes” or “cultures of dependency” in East and Central Africa.

We do not validate these dependencies empirically but instead treat them as discursive entities, paralleling the proliferation of similar rhetoric concerning self-reliance and sustainability in international development circles. By focusing on “dependency”—the negative pole to self-reliance and sustainability—we advance the study of development buzzwords as well as scholar-practitioner conversations about the prevalence of “dependency syndrome.”
Our analysis is based on a set of interviews and observations with health workers and staff from international development organizations in South Sudan carried out in May and December 2012. The initial intent of these data collection exercises was to identify challenges to food security at the household level, although, as we discuss below, claims about a “culture of dependency” arose inductively from our data, alongside more conventional information about food scarcity. These claims led us to speculate further on the multiple facets of “dependency.”

Our analysis is situated within an established sociological tradition of examining, scrutinizing, and critiquing claims that a “dependency syndrome,” defined by Kibreab (1993) as the “lack of initiative and motivation to work” (p. 330), is present in impoverished communities in the global South. The return to South Sudan is a particularly apt setting for consideration of this syndrome, as the term was coined by Harrell-Bond (1986) to describe what she saw as passive and counterproductive attitudes of Sudanese refugees in Uganda toward their own survival, leading to a surrender of independent action in favor of reliance on donors. This notion of dependency has been repeatedly challenged by other researchers, who find little to no empirical evidence to support it, even in the desperate conditions prevailing in refugee camps and stressed rural communities in central Africa (de Waal 1989; Kibreab 1993; Stockton 1998; Young et al. 2005; Bishop and Hilhorst 2010; Siyoum, Hilhorst, and van Uffelen 2012). Despite this research, discourses of dependency remain strong among donors and humanitarian organizations, in the form of a presumption that local populations inevitably are, or will become, passively dependent on donors (Lentz, Barrett, and Hoddinott 2005; see also Harvey and Lind 2005; Lind and Jalleta 2005) for an extensive discussion of “dependency syndrome” in the context of Ethiopian food relief). Dependency thus remains a powerful word.

Our interest in the power of this term draws not only from the East and Central African debates about dependency but also from the discursive work of other scholars on “buzzwords” and “keywords” in international development (Rist 2002; Sachs 2010; Cornwall and Eade 2010). Noting a long-standing conversation in the development literature on “dependency syndromes” (de Waal 1989; Hanlon et al. 2013), we highlight the persistence of dependency as an entrenched “buzzword” that constrains the analytical and operational scope of interventions (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Cornwall and Eade 2010).

In particular, we draw from the work of Swidler and Watkins (2009) on the term sustainability in AIDS organizations active in Malawi. Swidler and Watkins argue that the concept of sustainability—the idea that altruistic interventions into local communities should become completely self-supporting in short order, as local people assume responsibility for funding, decision making, and operations—has been elevated to the status of an axiom or a doctrine, embraced by both international INGO personnel and local elites. However, they say, the privations of the rural Malawian environment combined with the capricious bureaucratic and philosophical requirements of donors worked against the desired outcomes of many AIDS projects. Local people could not simultaneously achieve the goals of their projects—risk reduction, support for orphaned or widowed people—and also comply with the donors’ requirement that they be sustainable and completely self-reliant. As a consequence, projects were started and
abandoned in rapid succession. Perversely, the sustainability doctrine proved to be unsustainable.

Malawi is a very different context from South Sudan. The country is at peace, without the traumatic legacy of generations of violent conflict. In addition, although Malawi has attracted legions of INGOs bent on doing good, its institutional landscape is not dominated by the presence of large multinational organizations such as the World Food Program or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to the same degree as South Sudan. However, the central point of Swidler and Watkins’s exploration—the influence of development ideas and buzzwords on donor priorities, and hence on the outcomes of altruistic and humanitarian endeavors—is equally relevant to South Sudan.

Of particular relevance to this paper, Swidler and Watkins’s (2009) focus on sustainability points directly toward the “shadow side” of sustainability—the specter of dependency. In donor projects, they write, “The key contrast is between ‘sustainability,’ with its connotations of autonomy, self-reliance and rationality, and ‘dependence,’ with its taint of helplessness, passivity and irresponsibility” (p. 1184). Here, we direct attention to the deployment of that tainted term. This paper thus extends Swidler and Watkins’s work into a different geographical and social context and into the obverse of sustainability. We thus bring the study of “buzzwords” into conjunction with ongoing academic work on the existence (or nonexistence) of “dependency syndrome” in Central Africa.

We begin by laying out a taxonomy of four ways that one might speak about “dependency” in South Sudan. We then briefly summarize the ways our participants described the impact of prolonged violence on food security, leading to the inability of many Sudanese to meet their own food needs and their resulting turn to international organizations for assistance. This summary serves as context for the main concern of this paper: the repeated invocation of “dependency” as a cultural or psychological phenomenon to explain why after the formal end of hostilities the South Sudanese people remain unable to meet their basic food needs.

**South Sudan After Independence**

South Sudan is the world’s newest nation, as of 2011, and one of its poorest. Despite vast reserves of oil, it remains impoverished and devastated by four decades of violent conflict. South Sudan became independent from the Republic of Sudan to the north in 2011, yet the anticipated “peace dividend” from the cessation of war has failed to materialize. Approximately 90 percent of the population live on less than $US1 per day (Jauhari 2010), and severe food insecurity is estimated to afflict between 16 and 37 percent of the population (USAID 2010:6; SAS 2012).

Although the civil war with the Republic of Sudan is formally over, insecurity and collective violence continue to hamper movement toward a postconflict society. The Republic of Sudan sporadically launches attacks on South Sudan to stake a claim to contested border territory and has initiated military attacks against civilians in border territories, forcing refugees to flee to South Sudan.

In addition, South Sudan experiences ongoing internal conflict, launched by breakaway groups opposed to the central government, culminating in the quasi–civil war that broke
out in December 2013. At the time we collected our data, a less well known rebellion led by former political candidate David Yau Yau in Jonglei state was a major concern for many of the people we interviewed. The insurgencies are often connected, as in the case of Yau Yau, to ongoing clashes between ethnolinguistic groups over territory, water, and cattle that have been amplified by an influx of cheap weapons following the end of the conflict with the North. The country is also vulnerable to “pipeline politics,” as its economy is completely dependent on oil, which can be exported only through a pipeline leading north through the Republic of Sudan. Disputes over this pipeline have led the government of South Sudan to sporadically shut down oil production, as happened in January 2012, leading to a reduction of 98 percent in government revenue.

Studies suggest that malnutrition is significant, although variable by season and region. Acute malnutrition among children under five fluctuates around 19 percent, surpassing WHO’s 15 percent threshold for a child survival emergency (USAID 2010). The situation is worse for internally displaced people, returned refugees, and female-headed households (GOSS 2010). In Jonglei state a study of 340 households found that 83 percent of households had experienced at least one day in the last month in which no member of the household had any food to eat, including 48 percent of households who reported that this had happened more than three times (CHF 2012; see also Tappis et al. 2013). Significantly, these figures do not appear to have improved since national independence in 2011 and the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that brought an end to war with the Republic of Sudan in 2005.

In October 2011, the South Sudan National Bureau of Statistics reported that all staple foods were 100 to 250 percent more expensive than the previous year, an inflationary trend fed by South Sudan’s total economic dependence on volatile prices for its oil (SAS 2012:3). Similarly, a September 2011 assessment predicted that the food security situation was likely to get worse in 2012, with cereal production falling by 40 to 60 percent (3). Only 4 percent of South Sudan’s arable land is being cultivated, and the country is overwhelmingly dependent on imports, including food (Tappis et al. 2013; Grant and Thompson 2013). The current civil unrest has only exacerbated these conditions.

South Sudan is heavily dependent on INGOs for basic services (Kevany et al. 2012; Conway 2013). Martin and Mosel (2011) estimate that over 700 INGOs have been active in the country since independence, and Grant and Thompson (2013) describe an “enormous INGO apparatus [that] was put in place to support the newly formed government as it transitioned . . . to a new state” (219). As an indication of INGOs’ power, at the time of our visit the country had been divided into geographic zones corresponding to major INGOs, which would take on responsibility for basic social welfare in each zone. The post-December 2013 hostilities have caused many INGOs to pull out, but many others have stepped up their operation to deal with the refugees and internally displaced persons.

MULTIPLE DEPENDENCIES

In our discussions about the impacts of conflict on food security, we repeatedly heard the word dependency invoked, usually describing the deficiencies of the local people that led them to rely on donors for food. We did not introduce this term into the conversation;
rather, it arose from our conversations with people. The repeated use of this term with
respect to the food situation led us to consider other ways in which ideas of dependency
figure in the ways people talk about South Sudan:

1. **Economic dependency** as a structural aspect of natural resource extraction,
   worldwide trade, and economic globalization

2. **Organizational dependency** as a reflection of the dominant role that INGOs play
   within the country

3. **Cultural dependency** as a dimension of human characters and habits of the heart
   and mind after decades of war and instability

4. **Reverse dependency** as reflected in the INGO community’s need of South Sudanese
   destitution to justify their own work

Our attention was first caught by this term simply because “dependency” is familiar from
our own academic backgrounds. Dependency theory is a long-standing tradition in sociology,
offering a counterpoint to modernization theories of international development. Although our
exposure to the term comes from scholarly backgrounds, our participants had clearly learned
the term elsewhere. They came from diverse backgrounds, encompassing South Sudanese
nationals and expatriates, but all were hooked into international circuits of INGO networking
and cooperation—indeed, these circuits were what led us to the participants we found.
We posit that this term is common currency within many networks and communities in
South Sudan, although with a slightly different inflection than among academics.

**Economic Dependency**

The representation of South Sudan as a nation of dependents in our interviews resonates
with descriptions of the country as a whole as extremely dependent on oil. The World
Bank’s (2013) country overview of South Sudan describes it as the “most oil-dependent
country in the world,” and economic reviews and assessments of the country constantly
stress this dependency (e.g., Robinson 2012; Wei 2012). In nearly all depictions of South
Sudan in the international media, the fact of overwhelming dependency on oil prices vies
with the country’s status as the world’s newest nation and the ongoing conflict as the lead
talking point.

This world-systems view of dependency echoes other descriptions of economic depen-
dency in the sociological literature on boomtowns in North America (Freudenburg 1992)
and in other regions (Werthmann 2009). Boomtown literature provides middle-range
theory about the relationships between communities, regional development, and natural
resources, examining the predictable ways in which dependency on natural resources plays
out. This relationship is described as a “negative” dependency in that socioeconomic and
environmental conditions in these communities and regions are the inverse of more desir-
able, independent, states of existence (Tidball and Stedman 2012).

**Organizational Dependency**

A second aspect of dependency is reflected in the reliance of the South Sudanese state on
INGOs. This dependency on donors is also reflected in the scholarly and journalistic
treatment of South Sudan. The country and its leaders are described as being much too comfortable with letting INGOs and international donors take on the work of providing basic services to the population, a disposition linked to their reliance on oil, the first sense of dependency: “The world’s newest nation relies on oil to finance 98 percent of its budget. So when the government decided to shut off crude production in January after a dispute with a neighbor, South Sudan’s foreign donors and aid groups were shocked. How will the country survive, they wondered? By leaning even more heavily on donors and aid groups, an examination of the country’s safety net shows. As in many developing nations, international aid is both an invaluable help to South Sudan and a crutch that sometimes enables it to avoid reality” (Robinson 2012).

Scholars have connected this form of dependency to the extension of neoliberal ideology throughout the globe through constant broadening of the role of INGOs into more areas of public life, filling gaps that have been vacated or disregarded by state actors. As a result, “NGOs are the favoured institutional form through which every social problem is to be addressed, be it domestic violence, ecological devastation, food security or the aftermath of war” (Kamat 2013:ix). As noted above, South Sudan is an extreme case of dependency on INGOs to fulfill health, education, food security, and other mandates.

Cultural Dependency

Against these first two descriptions of dependency—as a type of structural dependency on energy resources and on international organizations—a third form of dependency emerged from our participants’ interviews. When our participants spoke of dependency on donors and INGOs, they did so with a vocabulary of culture, psyche, and habits of mind.

In this talk of dependency, we recognized terms that highlight presumed deficits in human capacity. These deficits are used to problematize or blame locals for being backward, lazy, or generally unequipped for the modern world. Unlike the versions of dependency described above, which draw attention to the ways that “external structures” cause problematic dependencies, this version of dependency draws attention to “internal structures” as a primary concern—structures of the mind and heart. Consistent with this view, our participants repeatedly returned to “dependency” as a concept that could explain why South Sudanese had not returned to farming for subsistence or for market exchange after the end of the war. This notion of dependency fits most closely with scholarship on the “dependency syndrome” as expressed by aid agencies that attempt to avoid such negative dependencies during relief efforts (Lentz et al. 2005). In the remainder of this paper, we pay particular attention to the idea of dependency as cultural or psychological artifact.

Reverse Dependency

Finally, our interviews suggest the continuing salience of a fourth way to think about “dependency” in the South Sudanese context—the dependency of international organizations on the poor communities they serve. This is not a new concept. Alex de Waal (1989) identified this type of “reverse” dependency in Sudan nearly two decades ago: “Food relief is much more important in the lives of relief agency employees, local government administrators, and consultant academics than it is in the lives of rural people. Certainly, it
is among the officials of district councils and regional ministers in Sudan that the ‘dependency syndrome’ is to be found, and not among the farmers and pastoralists” (p. 67). This statement is echoed in more recent critiques of the proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the NGO industry worldwide (Smillie 1995; Choudry and Kapoor 2013).

This form of dependency is similar to that identified by Harvey and Lind (2005) with respect to humanitarian organizations operating in Ethiopia during a recent famine, when the institutionalization of need among the beneficiary population led to a dynamic in which NGOs relied on hungry people to justify their continued operations. In our interviews, “reverse dependency” emerged tangentially, in the form of frustration with the activities of large INGOs. This concern was raised by people we met in the donor community, who were either grappling with mandates that required them to continually disburse food and basic supplies or complaining about other donors, especially “heavy hitters,” who were doing so. The incentive structure of these organizations was such that they could not disengage from handing out supplies and thus became themselves dependent on the ongoing needs of a population for food relief.

DATA COLLECTION

In May and December 2012, the authors visited Juba, South Sudan. Our first visit came at the invitation of the vice-chancellor of the University of Juba and was intended to acquaint ourselves with the political and institutional landscape of the country. During that visit, we met with representatives of the INGO, government, and academic sectors engaged in relief and development work (n = 22). Our second visit occurred under the auspices of a Canadian-based agency that supports extended medical education and health care, working with South Sudanese physicians. These skilled and salaried workers are among the economic and educational elite. This second visit provided most of the interview data for this paper.

Interviews with physicians (n = 11) focused on their experiences with food in the rural and periurban locations where they were stationed. They were based across the country, with the strongest representation from Jonglei state, where some of the most intense conflict in the country is occurring. We also held informal conversations with both South Sudanese and expatriate development workers, as we had done earlier in May 2012. Interviews were conducted in English, recorded, and transcribed. Less formal conversations were not recorded, but extensively written notes were taken, which were later transcribed and loaded into NVivo 10 for coding and analysis. In this paper, we refer to each interview and conversation as a “source,” identified by a brief description and a source number. In cases where several people were interviewed together, we identify each individual by number and letter: Source 4a, Source 13c, and so on.

We stress that we are not taking these accounts as objective truth. However, our data are valuable because they provide a perspective on what is going on in the country and they tell what people think is going on, in particular, the people who are charged with acting as change agents—the skilled South Sudanese whose mandate is to carry out government and donor programs for the well-being of the local people, and expatriate workers within INGOs.
FOOD INSECURITY AND DEPENDENCY

The immediate context for our interviews was the impacts of the ongoing civil insecurity on ability of people to grow or buy the food they need. This insecurity manifested itself through impacts on cultivation and on markets. One interviewee related the experience of farmers who attempt to hire businessmen with tractors to cultivate fields:

The insecurity is affecting a lot the production of food because it is difficult for the tractor person to go and work there, they cannot be there because they don’t have guns, and... the delinquents, yes, they do have a gun, and they come and shoot, and they steal just one goat that you have, they come and take it by force because you cannot defend it, and that is what makes people flee the place. They cannot cultivate, there is no rest there. (Source 5)

These impacts of conflict were complicated by ongoing struggles, such as the competition between cattle and crops for agricultural land. These factors were recursive, so that investment of resources in cattle in preference to dryland cultivation led to increases in cattle raiding between communities, which in turn raised the risks and dangers associated with working in the fields.

In addition to the direct impacts of war, participants spoke of the loss of agricultural knowledge and skill across generations:

The current generation I think also is not getting any basic information of farming, so I think it is very difficult, and that is a result of more dependency: if the new generation doesn’t have any guidance on how to support themselves, they are born during the dependencies and they grow up during that period, and now they are getting to [the age of marriage] and they also feel of that dependency. (Source 11, male Sudanese physician)

This was described as a change across generations, from older to younger, manifested as different “cultures”:

S: There is dependency on these handouts, [which] has created that gap in the culture of work, with one generation.
I: It takes just one generation to lose that.
S: Yeah. And as a result, you will find a lot of idling young men, with no income, they might look good dressing up [laughs], but you know at the end of the day they don’t have enough food, maybe one meal a day... and you see the health is no longer as in the traditional way. (Male Sudanese physician, Source 8)

In addition to constraining cultivation, the persistent insecurity was manifested in weak markets, making the purchase of food very difficult. These impacts ranged from damage to physical infrastructure through distortions in pricing and exchanges, as a result of near-total reliance on imports when local produce could not be sourced.

Transportation consistently emerged as a cause of uncertainty and high prices. Roads had been destroyed during the war and had not been rebuilt or were being rebuilt only very slowly because of ongoing internal insecurity:

The trade in products is not very much because of transport, because of many difficulties. People cannot go with their cassava, sweet potatoes, and tomatoes to Bor [because they] cannot transport unless you have got your own vehicle. (Source 7, Male Sudanese physician, Upper Nile state)
The existing network of dirt roads was strongly affected by seasons: during the rainy season, trucks and cars were at risk of being stranded for weeks. To compound the problem, the rainy season was also the time of year when the little local produce that was available for sale came onto markets.

I: For people in the villages, do they have markets where they buy local foods?
S: Actually they do have small market, not big market. When you see area that’s called Werkok, they have only one small shop. . . . He sells sorghum and he sells this flour, wheat flour, and also sugar and salt and onions. And when you buy one onion it is two pounds just for one onion.
I: And where does he get them from, does he grow these, or?
S: He comes and buys them in Juba.
I: He comes all the way to Juba?
S: All the way to Juba and back to Werkok, because when he buys them here [they are] expensive, so he has to sell them very expensive. Just imagine, he has to put them in his truck, and from truck, they have to charge him, so he has to charge people over there [in Werkok] to get a profit from that.
I: So nobody is growing onions locally, he can’t buy?
S: Nobody grows onions locally. Everything we have been receiving [is] from East Africa, from Kenya and Uganda. In some other areas [like] Eastern to Western Equatoria, some people grow onions, but that can’t be enough [for] all of the country. (Source 5, Male Sudanese physician, Jonglei state)

As this quote suggests, all participants stressed South Sudan’s dependence on external sources of food. A visit to one of Juba’s main markets confirmed this impression, as vendor after vendor told us that their produce had come in by truck or boat from other countries. The exceptions were foods that were extremely locally specific, such as kudra, a vegetable that is not grown elsewhere. While we had not expected to find processed or manufactured goods that were made in South Sudan, the absence of locally grown foods was striking, especially in contrast with markets in other African countries. Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia were the most frequently cited exporters of food, but we found apples from as far away as South Africa and chickens from Brazil in a Juba hotel.

I: So in the market of Bor, what kinds of foods are available?
S: In Bor currently now, they do have a variety of food, [including] they called spaghetti.
I: Imported types?
S: Yes, imported types of food. They also have maize flour, they have this Kenyan, Ugandan ugali. . . . And the price is very high, so only a small [container of] wheat flour is about 180 South Sudanese pounds.
I: So only wealthy people can buy?
S: Only wealthy people can buy these foods imported from East Africa. (Source 12, female Sudanese physician, Juba town)

In addition to difficulties with logistics and supply, the market for food in South Sudan was weak simply because very few people earned enough cash income to be able to buy food. Our participants were able to compare the skyrocketing prices of soft drinks and bags of sugar because they had enough cash to be able to contemplate buying these items, but the
majority of South Sudanese did not earn enough to support shops selling more than the basics. Of those who did earn cash, the majority worked for the government in some form, and their salaries were also affected by the shutoff of the oil. Wages were delayed, or paid only in part. One physician who worked in the most food-scarce province of South Sudan had gone for three months without pay, eating only one meal a day. Even if he had received his wages, he would not have been able to meet his needs by purchasing foods because there was so little cash in his area that operating market stalls or shops was not viable, and the few existing shops often ran out of stock early in the month (Source 2, male Sudanese physician). Only those who worked for the military were exempt from this contraction in income.

THE “CULTURE OF DEPENDENCY”

In addition to the tangible consequences of insecurity, manifested in the destroyed infrastructure and the abandoned fields, participants repeatedly brought up the issue of psychological or cultural dependency, which they identified as a mind-set that militated against self-reliance or agricultural work. This term was repeatedly cited not only by the South Sudanese doctors but also by expatriate development workers and international altruists in Juba. This notion of dependency has been raised to the status of a commonsense narrative in these circles, a story invoked to explain the failures of South Sudanese to become self-reliant.

According to participants, the “culture of dependency” was produced by decades of reliance on food aid provided by outside sources during the civil war. Roughly 1.5 million South Sudanese were displaced during the two-decade war, most into large refugee camps in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda. An unknown number of these refugees returned from the camps after the war, and in the accounts of the doctors the experiences of these returnees were generalized to describe the entire rural population. Although not all rural Sudanese are returnees, the numbers are high—the UN estimates that 405,792 displaced South Sudanese returned to the country between October 2010 and June 2012, split roughly in half between those who returned with government assistance (receiving relief food along the way) and those who returned unassisted. In addition to refugees, an unknown number, possibly as high as 1 million, were internally displaced during the war, as well as another unknown number who are still displaced because of ongoing internal conflicts. Thus many South Sudanese rural areas are characterized by a population that ebb and flows, moving in and out of environments where food is supplied to them (UN OCHA 2013). According to the doctors we interviewed, habits of dependency were learned during decades spent in refugee camps in neighboring countries, and the World Food Program was identified as the major player (although “the UN” was also mentioned).

My area was destroyed by war . . . so if you want to get the good life in food, you have to walk away, coming to Uganda or Ethiopia. (Source 9, male Sudanese physician, Jonglei state)

Refugee camps forbade cultivation to prevent people from creating permanent settlements, so the only source of food was donation:

Some people have been in refugee camps, such as in Kakuma, in Uganda, in other countries, they have not been cultivating anything, they have been depending on this World Food Program. (Source 5, male Sudanese physician, Jonglei state)
Our people now are lazy, they are not working 100 percent because they come from refugee camps, they spent 22 years of war there, and they were eating for free. So to them, everything must be free. (Source 9, male Sudanese physician, Jonglei state)

According to participants, the refugee camp experience instilled a set of ongoing preferences and predispositions that remained durable. Participants used the language of “culture” to describe the expectation of and dependence on donor food.

These preferences were instilled during the decades of war and shaped the way that contemporary South Sudanese view agriculture:

S: There is a food shortage in the country because during the war the South Sudanese people were relying on the World Food Program. They always bring them food and always help them. People are always afraid because they couldn’t cultivate because the war was going on. So they were unable to really cultivate in their villages, which . . . put them in the situation that they are neglecting the habit and culture of really cultivating for yourself . . . When you see people who have that culture of cultivating, they are the older people, but now I believe they have died and we have a different generation . . . So you see that culture of work for yourself and try to have whatever you can get for yourself, they have lost that habit . . . This habit, it becomes like their culture, they want everything to be brought to them. (Source 10, female Sudanese physician, Upper Nile state)

The participant quoted above, who was also highly placed in the South Sudanese government before the upheavals of December 2013, depicted returnees as unwilling to move beyond the dependency that had characterized their lives in the camps:

S: I remember when they told the IDPs [internally displaced peoples], they were all brought to Malakal, and they were put there for a couple of months, and they [the government] told them, “Now you are here to settle yourselves and try to start moving to your villages.” They refused to move.
I: They preferred to live in camp conditions?
S: That camp is terrible. That place, if you live there you need to be provided everything, food, water, whatever, and we cannot provide you these things forever. The government cannot provide for you forever, you need to go to your village in four months. . . . When you are ready, you tell us to take you there for transportation and we will transport you there to your area. They don’t want to go . . . The IDPs are the ones making things to be difficult, but really they have the choice . . . They are refusing to leave that place, but that is a temporary place.

This mind-set was depicted as something which had been historically produced rather than an intrinsic part of South Sudanese culture. Participants drew a stark before-and-after picture of their community, from a social group marked by shared values of self-reliance and work to one marked by “laziness” and apathy:

You don’t see much effort of farming, and that results in more dependency if the new generation doesn’t have any guidance on how to support themselves. They are born during dependency and they grow up during that period, and now they are getting to their marry-hood [the age of marrying and full adulthood], and they feel that dependency. (Source 12, male Sudanese physician, Jonglei state)
Despite the loss of “the culture of work,” the doctors did not regard the behaviors acquired during the years in refugees as irreversible, and they used themselves as examples of how expectations and predispositions could change as circumstances changed. One doctor, who had grown up in the refugee camps, described how he and his fellows relearned the traditional Sudanese values of work from going to school in Cuba, where agricultural work was part of the curriculum:

I: Is there anything you can think to change that [dependency on food donations]?
S: To change that culture of people to depend, I think they can change. Tell them the truth, you go and work and produce your food by yourself. Then they can change that, because if you are hungry, you know [laughs] . . . So if you just stop the food aid and say that it is finished. Like when we were in Cuba, we left [the refugee camps] with that mentality of “We don’t want to work,” then you know in school, a system of Cuba is studying and you go and work in the morning time [makes sounds of hoeing] to prepare you for the future. You are not just writing when you go there, because when you come and eat they told you, you are not right to eat, because you didn’t go to work. So we learned, we learned there to go out and work in the morning. (Source 9, male Sudanese physician, Jonglei state)

The influence of donor food was not a thing of the past. Many doctors stated that the World Food Program was still active in their areas, distributing rations in times of environmental disasters such as floods or droughts. Source 2, a male Sudanese doctor who worked in Akobo County, which achieved notoriety in 2010 as the “hungriest place on earth” before South Sudan’s independence (Harding 2010), said that his area was wracked by floods and still entirely dependent on handouts of sorghum and oil, which were distributed every two months. The doctors saw this food distribution as laudable and necessary but were critical of food distribution in areas that were not currently suffering from humanitarian emergencies, such as Bor town. In these areas, the provision of food was said to reinforce the mind-set of dependency. Some participants said that food distribution had slowed down in their areas, but others claimed that food distribution had become an end in itself, with INGOs as well as the major donors using food distribution to secure their popularity in an area.

Expatriate development workers were even more critical of what they saw as some INGOs’ continued investment in food distribution. Some claimed that the market in Bor town was filled with surplus World Food Program food, which drove out local sellers and removed incentives to cultivate. If a local farmer produces a surplus of grain or vegetables and tries to sell it, said one man, “The seller next to him is selling WFP food he got for nothing. What does he [the farmer] think?” (Source 4a, male American volunteer for evangelical organization). Others said that during their sojourn in Bor “We ate rice and beans the whole time we were there—but they [local Sudanese] don’t grow rice and beans. It’s all WFP food” (Source 4b, male American volunteer for evangelical organization).

Overcoming the effects of the “dependency complex” was a major goal articulated by expatriate workers. They recommended reading publications on the excesses and failures of international aid, such as When Helping Hurts (Corbett and Fikkert 2009) or African Friends and Money Matters (Maranz 2001), which extol the virtues of self-reliance and
independence for African communities. They also spoke of the urgent necessity of getting South Sudanese communities “working again” and of undoing the “dependency complex” created by the World Food Program and other charitable organizations (Source 3, male Sudanese employee of a large INGO). This worldview from the expatriates dovetailed with the accounts of the local physicians, as both saw the “dependency problem” as something culturally rooted, requiring cultural change to make the South Sudanese into more rational, more autonomous people. In the words of a male Canadian volunteer for an evangelical organization (Source 4c), “This requires the men to be really working, just like a farmer in [his home province] would work.”

**DISCUSSION**

This emphasis on dependency as a major stumbling block to food security is at first puzzling when placed alongside the more concrete impediments of postconflict South Sudan, such as the lack of markets and political insecurity. However, it is consistent with prevailing discourses of African development, in which self-reliance and independence are raised to the status of ideals, articulated by both “insiders” and “outsiders” in African communities.

As Fraser and Gordon (1994) pointed out, the idea of “dependency” acquired powerful negative moral valence within neoclassical economics in the twentieth century, whence it filtered into the discourse of international development actors (Dahl 2001). In the last few decades, scholars have debated the empirical realities of dependency, with much concern about overstating the problem. During the 1980s, Alex de Waal (1989) suggested that people in Darfur showed little signs of dependency and showed instead a kind of self-reliance whereby food aid was used as one resource to overcome very severe challenges. Similarly, Stockton (1998) stated that there was no “systematic evidence of humanitarian aid being provided in sufficient quantity nor with adequate reliability for anyone in their right minds, except perhaps aid workers, to become dependent upon it, let alone build a ‘culture of dependency’ around it” (p. 357). Given the clear lines of debate around notions of dependency, it was surprising to observe the extent to which this narrative pervaded our conversations with people in South Sudan. This pervasiveness suggests that academic debates and dissent about dependency syndrome do not have much traction in on-the-ground work in South Sudan.

The reliance on dependency as an explanatory category also brings to mind the proliferation of “buzzwords” within international development policy circles. Since the first edition of Wolfgang Sachs’s (1992) *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power,* these “buzzwords” have been scrutinized with attention to their capacity to define, dictate, and often obscure the workings of power in development. Such analysis is focused on the nefarious uses of these words, epitomizing by Rist’s (2002) carefully articulated thesis that the very concept of “development,” and all its cognates, is a screen for the constant expansion of market relationships.

Most analyses have interrogated words that are used to signify that which is benign or desirable, such as *empowerment, participation,* and *transparency,* showing how these terms have been used to advance agendas that may not be so benign (e.g., contributors to Cornwall and Eade 2010). Relatively little attention, in comparison, has been paid to the ways in
which the undesirable has been named (although see Harrison [2010] on corruption as buzzword). In this respect, our elaboration of the concept of dependency in this paper offers ways to move beyond the limiting conversations about syndromes to a more holistic understanding of dependency within a South Sudan development context.

Dependency also differs from the usual suspects among development buzzwords in that it can be turned back upon those who deploy it. Although in this research dependency was used to describe a worldview or state of mind held by the South Sudanese population (a common usage) with respect to the INGOs active in the country, it could also arguably describe the relationship of these INGOs with respect to the population. In other words, the arrow of directionality in the relationship implied by dependency could be reversed, implying a dependency of INGOs on the population of South Sudan. Our informants spoke of a mutually reinforcing relationship between donor organizations that distribute food relief throughout the country and the recipient communities, representing a kind of “codependency” that persists throughout the country, particularly in more remote regions where food aid is common. Indeed, INGOs (in particular the World Food Program) were described in terms suggesting that they themselves were dependent on the existence of a hungry population to justify their activities, as depicted above. It might thus make sense to speak, as some of our informants did, of “the dependencies,” rather than dependency as a unitary and unidirectional concept.

If reliance on donated food produces mutual dependency, how might this conundrum be resolved on a practical level? One obvious remedy to the challenges at hand might involve reducing dependencies and working toward a more diverse economic base that includes local agricultural production. This approach was favored by most of the physicians and INGO development workers we spoke to, as an alternative to engagements with South Sudan that were strictly humanitarian and focused on emergency relief. Their views were reminiscent of the North American context of single-industry towns being encouraged to diversify their economies (Freudenburg 1992). Yet these policy solutions have proven extremely difficult to implement because of remote locations, distant markets, limited local employment in resource extraction, and a myriad of other structural and cultural constraints that limit the potential for meaningful change and long-term sustainability.

The problems of South Sudan are not dissimilar. The familiar keywords of development—such as capacity building, empowerment, and self-reliance—are unlikely to make any real impact on the ground without attention to the structural constraints (insecurity, transportation, regional markets, and the impact of food relief) that are discussed at length in this paper. Indeed, such keywords have the potential to be detrimental to the long-term situation of South Sudan.

CONCLUSION

As Swidler and Watkins (2009) demonstrate, strong attachments by donors and elites to concepts such as “self-reliance,” “sustainability” and “empowerment” can lead to changes in discourse and changes in conceptual orthodoxies without adequate attention to the material constraints facing impoverished communities. Such terms also deflect attention onto the presumed cultural or psychological deficits of local people, leading to vague but sweeping
generalizations about the need to remake people as independent, autonomous self-starters, or as Canadian farmers. This tendency to prescribe cultural overhauls is more pronounced in our data than in Swidler and Watkins’s Malawian study, perhaps because the devastating disruptions of South Sudan’s violent history have created the conceptual space to imagine such profound changes. We cannot yet gauge whether this sociocultural aspect of dependency in the form of preferences for handouts and giveaways, described in our interviews, is a major empirical problem or whether it is primarily a rhetorical device for expressing frustration with the current situation.

Existing scholarship on “dependency syndrome” suggests that we are right to be concerned about the power of this term. Lind and Jalleta (2005) argued that the concept of dependency has held “great discursive power” in Ethiopian development politics and that staving off the specter of “dependency,” even though there is little evidence that peasants have actually become dependent on food aid, has driven the implementation of policies meant to increase self-reliance, with mixed impacts (p. 42). Other scholars in Central Africa attest to the ideological power of “dependency” in shaping the actions of governments, INGOs, and other stakeholders (Stockton 1998; Barrett and Maxwell 2005; Siyoum et al. 2012).

It is worth bearing in mind that the overwhelmingly negative connotations attached to dependency may be excessive. All human organisms, whether individual or social, are dependent on others. The difficulty lies in sorting out which dependencies are dysfunctional and degrade the possibilities for well-being, and which ones might better be thought of as interdependencies that benefit both parties: what Tidball and Stedman (2012) described as “positive” dependency, or what Sharp (1998) described as a positive economic condition of dependence. Aspiring to complete autonomy and independence, or prescribing such aspirations to others, may not be realistic, given the “materiality” of South Sudan (Swidler and Watkins 2009:1185)—the concrete circumstances of poverty and insecurity.

REFERENCES


**NOTE**

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