

**EFFECTS OF REGIONAL ARMED CONFLICT ON THE INTERNATIONAL
HUMANITARIAN SERVICES (THE CASE OF SOUTH SUDAN)**

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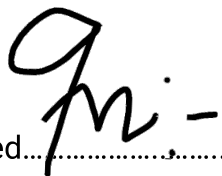


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DECLARATION

I **Nakimbugwe Victoria** hereby declare that this research dissertation titled **"Effects of Regional Armed Conflict on the International Humanitarian Services: The Case of South Sudan"** is my original work and has never been submitted to any academic institution for any academic award.

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APPROVAL

This dissertation titled **“Effects of Regional Armed Conflict on the International Humanitarian Services: The Case of South Sudan”** has been submitted by Nakimbugwe Victoria to the School of Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the award of Bachelor Degree of Governance and International Relations of Uganda Christian University with my approval as the supervisor.



05/11/2026

Sign..... Date.....

DEDICATION

First and foremost, I thank my God for giving me wisdom, health protection and all the love needed throughout my journey of education up to this stage. I dedicate this research dissertation to my Aunt Teddy Obunga, my Brother Opio David, Dear parents, my Siblings and Cousin Sooyung Obunga who have greatly supported me; Spiritually, financially, morally and with all the encouragement, that has enabled me throughout the entire process. I further dedicate this work to my supervisor who has given me all the technical and academic support. I also dedicate this research to all friends who have been good to me throughout my academic journey process. Thank you and May the Almighty Father reward you abundantly.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATION

AU	-	African Union
CHFS	-	Consolidated Humanitarian Funding Services
ED	-	Executive Director
ERC	-	Emergency Relief Coordinator
FAO	-	Food and Agriculture Organization
IHL	-	International Humanitarian Law
INGO	-	International Non-Governmental Organization
IOM	-	International Organization for Migration
IPC	-	International Food Security Phase Classification
MSF Borders)	-	Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without
NGO	-	Non-Governmental Organization
OCHA	-	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (United Nations)

POC	-	Protection of Civilians (often referring POCsites/camps)
RRC Sudan)	-	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (South
SARR	-	South Sudan Annual Resource Report
SPLA	-	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLA-IO	-	Sudan People's Liberation Army-In Opposition
UN	-	United Nations
UNDP	-	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	-	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	-	United Nations Children's Fund
UNMISS	-	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
USAID Development	-	United States Agency for International
WFP	-	World Food Programme
WHO	-	World Health Organization

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ABSTRACT

Following the outbreak of a violent civil war in 2013, South Sudan has become one of the world's most dangerous places for humanitarian aid workers. In this study, we assess the dramatic effects of regional armed conflict on the effectiveness of international humanitarian assistance, exploring how violence, politics and bureaucratic battles affect the lives of more than 2.7 million refugees and internally displaced people.

Employing a mixed-method approach, the study leverages quantitative methods to understand secondary data on incidents, complemented by qualitative data from 40 semi-structured interviews with humanitarian workers, government actors, and civilians. The analysis shows a strong negative association ($r = -0.78$) between intensity of conflict and delivery of services. Even amid physical infrastructure and medically-targeted violence, the study reveals a "performance of care" in which short, poorly budgeted visits are used to meet donor reporting obligations, but do not treat the underlying causes of vulnerability.

At the heart of the study is the finding that access is not simply defined by violence, but is highly politicized. Whilst high-intensity violence leads to direct military bans, complexity and "post-conflict" sees "bureaucratic warfare" and state actors strategically using administrative control and

taxation to exert power and extort resources. Moreover, the study unravels a monolithic pretension of the state, even as it is a fragmented conglomerate of competing "fiefdoms" of military officers and political appointees who profit from humanitarian aid.

This work offers a conclusion that humanitarian effectiveness in South Sudan is systematically flawed. It is the result of a political economy in which both state and non-state actors have adapted to the short-term heroic, technical aid system without enhancing performance. The conclusions are a wake-up call to policymakers and international actors to move away from reductionist policies and implement conflict-sensitive policies that acknowledge the interactive, political nature of aid in South Sudan.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This chapter will basically dwell on the Effects of Conflicts on Humanitarian Services in South Sudan. The study will contain the background of the Study, Statement of the Problem, Objectives of the Study, Research Question, Significance of the Study, scope and limitation of the study, and the organization of the Study.

1.0 Background

1.1.1 Historical background

South Sudan, which gained independence after almost 50 years of conflict with Sudan in 2011. It became embroiled in a new brutal conflict in late 2013, when a political fight in which ethnic and political divisions converged spiraled into violence. The conflict has caused widespread, often ethnically targeted, displacement of civilians and the warring sides have been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity. The conflict and humanitarian crisis have forced more than 2.7 million people from their homes, with more than 200,000 of them seeking refuge in U.N.

peacekeeping bases in the country. And more than 1 million people have sought refuge in neighbouring states. According to U.N. agencies, the humanitarian crisis, already severe as more than 40% of the population are facing extreme hunger is deteriorating with conflict triggering a food price spike. Humanitarian workers, including hundreds of internationals are increasingly at risk. In 2015, South Sudan replaced Afghanistan with the

most reported acts of violence against humanitarians. The first ten years of South Sudan's independence has been characterised by conflicts more than that of other Sub-Saharan Africa countries. Most of these have taken the form of civil wars and until recently, they have gone largely unnoticed by the international community. In real sense, these civil wars have had a tremendous impact, making the international community take interest. This is in the form of humanitarian support and political support through the regional mediation bloc. Most of the academic and political analyses of disasters and conflict hybrid situations assumes the single entity of conflict and ignores the variability in conflict situations and how they impact disaster response (Hilhorst 2015). But this research seeks to convey how conflict impacts on provision of humanitarian services and how the actions of international and national actors are largely driven by the type of conflict. The humanitarian community is diffuse. It is a field where different actors are operating under different hats: post-conflict reconstruction, natural disasters or humanitarian and development aid agencies, capacity building enthusiasts and more.. It is also part of the larger international community, along with the UN, multilateral, donors, states, individual NGOs, private and military players, in a rather broad 'international community' (that is rarely specified, "The Pulse of Humanitarian Assistance", 2013). However, being called 'humanitarian' is different from being called 'aid' or 'development' and humanitarians differentiate themselves from the state and others. The humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality constitute not just a form of self-definition and justification, but are used (and believed) to

justify safe access to people and territory. As such, humanitarianism necessarily relies on and operates this image of action as exceptional to the state and international politics.. Humanitarian action in disasters and in an environment of conflict and war; identify three forms of conflict scenario: high-intensity conflicts, low-intensity conflicts and post-conflict scenarios. The conflict is dynamic and multi-faceted: a country that is deemed to be in the state of post-conflict situation, may witness insurgencies or outbursts of violence. So, the boundaries between high, low or post conflict are blurred. Recent humanitarian interventions in war and disaster situation by donor governments, international organisations, such as the United Nations (UN), and remarkably, non-governmental agencies (NGOs) have saved hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives and the supply of food and medical supplies to refugees and internally displaced people.

Despite significant long-term international humanitarian assistance, humanitarian access is often limited, civilian protection is insufficient and the conflict continues(Mohamed & Homeida, 2024), and food security is low (Widayat & Surwandono, 2022), questioning these interventions' efficiency, impartiality and effectiveness in conflict situations.

1.1.2 Theoretical Background

Humanitarian theory of access was a guide for the study which asserts access to help recipients is a prerequisite for humanitarian intervention. Sudan's armed conflict has limited access via violence and administrative

regulations (Mohamed & Homeida, 2024). The research also draws on complex emergency theory, which describes the impact of multiple political, military, and humanitarian crises, on the effectiveness of aid.

1.1.3 Contextual Background

In Sudan, ongoing conflict has closed aid routes, forced millions of people to flee, and armed groups limit humanitarian access, as well as militant activity stops humanitarian operations (Mohamed & Homeida, 2024). Lack of infrastructure (Pham et al., 2016) and inter-communal conflict (Renzaho et al., 2022) hinder delivery. These examples illustrate the impact of regional conflict environments on aid effectiveness.

1.2 Conceptual Background

Regional armed conflict is the independent variable and effectiveness of international humanitarian aid is the dependent variable. The research examines the impacts of conflict activity, armed groups and cross-border tensions on aid access, delivery and outcomes.

1.3 Problem Statement

Armed conflict in South Sudan since 2013 has resulted in a humanitarian crisis, with displacement, food insecurity, infrastructure destruction and vulnerability of civilians. Violence that began in December 2013 resulted in large-scale displacement, economic activities and market activities being disrupted, which led to greater dependence on humanitarian aid (Koos & Gutschke, 2014). On-going conflict, civilian attacks and movement

restrictions have hampered humanitarian activities. Disaster complexity caused by conflicts restricts the humanitarian response and complicates service delivery (Mena, 2023). Humanitarian organisations in South Sudan have been affected by access and security restrictions and the inability to operate efficiently and navigate the conflict landscape.

International humanitarian services, as a best practice should respond effectively to humanitarian crises in conflict by providing timely and efficient humanitarian aid delivery, access to vulnerable populations, and security of humanitarian staff. Humanitarian actors rely on principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality to negotiate access and provide humanitarian services in conflict (Hotho & Girschik, 2019). And also, Coordination between humanitarian actors, governments and non-government actors should help ensure effective humanitarian response and service delivery for vulnerable groups during humanitarian crises (Tosi & Marty, 2023).

Yet, while international humanitarian actors are present and humanitarian funding continues to flow, humanitarian assistance in South Sudan is limited (d'Errico et al. 2021). Humanitarian actors are part of an international community which includes states, NGOs and military actors and this can complicate humanitarian access and coordination (Bsisu & Murdie, 2021). Additionally, ongoing conflict conflates humanitarian and development assistance and leads to an over-stretched humanitarian system (Policinski & Kuzmanovic, 2019). In South Sudan, insecurity, political interference, attacks on aid workers, and a lack of infrastructure

continue to hinder humanitarian access and hinder the effectiveness of international humanitarian assistance (Agwanda & Asal, 2020).

This results in a lack of an effective humanitarian response in armed conflict and limited access to humanitarian services in South Sudan. The gap has consequences such as a sustained suffering of vulnerable civilians, a coverage gap of humanitarian services, wastage of resources, and inefficiency in humanitarian response and assistance.

As such, this research is important as it aims to assess the impact of local armed conflict between South Sudan and other parties on international humanitarian services in South Sudan between 2013 and 2025. The results will better explain policymakers, humanitarian services providers and academics on the challenges of humanity assistance services in conflict regions and make suggestions on how to improve humanitarian aid in such cases.

1.4 Scope of the study

The scope of the study will be South Sudan.

1.4.1 Content Scope

The scope content will be Security, access, humanitarian aid, co-ordination and staff safety.

1.4.2 Time Scope

Time scope will be between 2013–2025.

1.5 Rationale for the Study

South Sudan was identified as the country of the study due to the ongoing violence and reliance on external assistance. This case study offers lessons that can be applied in humanitarian response in regional conflicts.

1.6 Study Importance

This research will provide inputs to policymakers, humanitarian organizations, researchers, and international actors regarding how to enhance humanity in conflict-stricken places. It will also consider a disconnect between international sympathy or support and worsening humanitarian crises.

1.7 Conceptual Framework

Independent Variables, therefore, will tackle regional wars and consider variables such as intensity of violence, armed actors, trans-boundary instability.

Dependent Variable will focus on delivery of international humanitarian aid and take into account the following variables: access, timeliness, coverage and safety.

1.8 Research Objectives

1.8.1 Broad objective

To evaluate the impact of armed conflicts on humanitarian aid in 2013-2025.

1.8.2 Specific objectives

To examine how armed conflict impacted the provision of international humanitarian services in South Sudan.

To understand how scale of conflict impacts access to humanitarian services in South Sudan.

To examine the impact of state and non-state actors in conflict on the effectiveness of humanitarian services in South Sudan.

1.9 Research questions

How do political actors (state and non-state actors) in conflict affect humanitarian assistance in South Sudan?

Why are humanitarian workers targeted when providing humanitarian aid?

What can be done to negate the impact of conflict on humanitarian assistance in South Sudan?

1.10 Research Hypothesis

For the sake of (Kothari, 2014), hypothesis is a proposition or a set of propositions, set forth as an explanation for the occurrence of some specified group of phenomena either asserted merely as a provisional conjecture to guide some investigation or accepted as highly probable in the light of established facts. Thus, this research will investigate impact of conflict on humanitarian services in South Sudan.

H 1: Humanitarian services cannot be affected by conflict.

H 2: Humanitarian services can be affected by conflict.

H 3: Armed conflict significantly reduces humanitarian access or they don't

H 4: Presence of armed groups significantly reduces aid coverage or they don't

H 5: Armed conflict significantly raises security risks to humanitarian workers or they don't.

1.11 Focus and limits of the research.

The study will be focused on impacts of conflict in humanitarian assistance. The study will not include other factors such as humanitarian funding and political constrain in the time of peace. The study will cover a period of 2013 – 20205. Geographical location of the study will be in the Republic of South Sudan.

1.12 The significance of the Study

The study will be significant to humanitarian services provider who will know the effects of conflict on the humanitarian assistance in South Sudan.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

The chapter offers an overview of existing literature on the impact of armed conflict on international humanitarian services. It is designed to offer introductory, theoretical and empirical basis for the research. This chapter starts with a definition of the key concepts central to the study: humanitarian assistance, humanitarian access and armed conflict. It then explores the theories that have informed the study, namely, Humanitarian Access, Theory and Complex Emergency Theory. Next, a rich empirical review is detailed, exploring global and South Sudan-focused literature on conflict characteristics, humanitarian assistance challenges, targeting of aid workers and political actors. The chapter finishes by identifying the research gap tackled by this study, drawing on the literature to justify the research objectives inspired by (Blanchard, 2016), Hilhorst (2015), (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010), (Salomons, 2015), (Veit, 2011), and Roanne van Voorst

and Dorothea Hilhorst (2018).

2.1 Conceptual Framework Review

2.1.1 Understanding Humanitarian Assistance

Humanitarian assistance is generally defined as action and assistance aimed at saving lives, reducing suffering and preserving human dignity in and after situations of humanitarian catastrophe and humanitarian crisis, such as natural disasters and armed conflicts (Puri et al., 2015). becomes, according to (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010), a "fuzzy" community, an arena where different actors are operating under different headings like "reconstruction after conflict", "emergency relief", "humanitarian aid", "development aid, assistance", "capacity building", and so on. Humanitarian assistance aims to deliver immediate assistance to save lives and to build readiness against future crises (Puri et al., 2015). This type of aid is not the same as development aid which is targeted to foster economic growth and well-being. (Salomons, 2015) highlights how humanitarian aid is short-term and has system-led coordination, whereas development assistance is government-led and focuses on complimenting and strengthening systems. In South Sudan, this is especially important as the crisis is ongoing and the lines between providing life-long assistance and development of health and infrastructure are being blurred.

This highlights the complexities of humanitarian assistance in times of conflict.

2.1.2 Humanitarian Access

Humanitarian access is the ability of populations affected by crisis to access goods and services provided by humanitarian organizations, and for humanitarian organizations to access affected populations. (Roanne & Thea, 2017) identify three categories of conflict that impact access: high-intensity conflicts, low-intensity conflicts and post-conflict. They highlight the dynamic and multilayered nature of conflict and that a country classified as being in post-conflict may not have peace, but rather insurgencies or outbursts. This means the lines between high, low or post conflict are blurred and humanitarian access is a complex and intermingled negotiation in this context.

Access is not merely a logistical, but a highly politicised process. (Veit, 2011) notes that humanitarian actors work together with the UN, donors and other multilateral groups, states, individual NGOs, private and military actors, in an ill-defined "international community". In conflict environments such as South Sudan, humanitarian actors do not simply secure access through invoking the principles of the International Humanitarian Law (IHL), but through negotiations and agreements with numerous actors, ranging from state militaries and bureaucrats to non-state armed groups (or NSAGs) and community leaders.

Neutrality, impartiality and independence as humanitarian principles of action are a form of identifying and legitimating the humanitarian actor and are used (and trusted) to secure access to people and place ((Roanne & Thea, 2017)). In this context, humanitarianism necessarily relies and operates within this image of exceptionalism to the state and world politics.

Up to now, a good deal in the academic and political interest in the discussion of the intersection of humanitarian disasters and conflict treats conflict as a monolithic phenomenon, ignoring the variation among conflict settings and disaster response issues in these settings, such as access issues (Hilhorst, 2015).

2.1.3 The Concept of Armed Conflict

Armed conflict is a multi-dimensional concept. One helpful way of categorising armed conflicts is into high-intensity conflicts (widespread, sustained violence), low-intensity conflicts (localised, intermittent violence) and post-conflict (violence is declared to have ended but turmoil and insurgencies can still be present), but these often overlap. In South Sudan, (Blanchard, 2016) chronicles that since 2013, the conflict has taken several forms, from the original civil war stage, when a political divide that intersected historical ethnic and political fault lines escalated, to sub-national and communal continues to occur. This gives rise to a "complex mesh" of actors and interests, presenting a challenging operating environment for humanitarian actors. Modern-day conflicts are marked not only by the intentional targeting of civilians, but also the infrastructure they are reliant on, such as hospitals and aid supplies, in violation of IHL. (Blanchard, 2016) observes that civilians have been a systematic target in the South Sudanese conflict, often along ethnic fault lines, and the parties to the conflict have been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This research builds on two interconnected theories to provide a strong context in which to understand the study problem.

2.2.1 Humanitarian Access Theory

This theory proposes that the success of humanitarian assistance hinges on the ability to secure effective access to affected people. It extends beyond a purely logistical approach to access through the legal, security and negotiation processes that determine access and delivery. In South Sudan, access to negotiations are not apolitical, as negotiations are part of the conflict's dynamics. Following (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010), it can be suggested that these negotiations can have unintended consequences as negotiation and access to may inadvertently change local power relations, force certain alliances and support or undermine local peace processes. The type of access humanitarian actors secure from armed groups may give these groups legitimacy, or a stronger position, and so impact the conflict they seek to ameliorate.

(Roanne & Thea, 2017) underline that the humanitarian community is part and parcel of that international community and their positioning relative to the state and others is important. The humanitarian principles are a means of identification and legitimisation, and are invoked for safe passage. This theory is critical for the understanding of the reported constraints in conflict environments, where access to and supply of goods for opposition-held areas may be seized by the government, explicitly politicising aid as

per contextual background above.

2.2.2 Complex Emergency Theory

Complex Emergency Theory describes emergencies that involve a complex mix of armed conflict, food shortage, displacement, disease outbreaks and a breakdown of local coping mechanisms. These crises are generally long-lasting and demand an international response that is complex and not merely disaster focused. South Sudan is a prime example of a complex emergency in which political violence, economic deterioration and cyclical climatic shocks intermingle. Hilhorst (2015) suggests that research needs to broaden from conceptualising conflict as a monolithic entity and consider the variety in conflict contexts and challenges in disaster management.

The conflict and humanitarian crisis has displaced some 1.5 million people, with over 200,000 taking refuge in U.N. peacekeeping camps in South Sudan (Munive, 2018; Silva, 2019). More than 2 million South Sudanese are refugees in neighbouring countries (Kanneh & Awolusi, 2021). According to U.N. agencies, the humanitarian situation - already dire due to widespread food insecurity and - has deteriorated as conflict has resulted in steep food price rises (Pereira, 2019; Silva, 2019). The theory points out how these crises are a vicious cycle. For example, the conflict affects agriculture, resulting in food insecurity; displacement places people in high-risk environments where diseases are likely to spread; and this is further aggravated by the fact that health systems are often poorly funded and

attacked. This model helps us understand why the humanitarian need is so great even after large international aid inflows, as these often just treat the symptoms of the crisis.

2.3 Empirical Review

2.3.1 The nature of conflict and its impact on the civilian population in South Sudan

With the onset of civil war in December 2013, South Sudan has witnessed tremendous suffering. (Willems & Borgh, 2016) outline the roots of this conflict, while noting that on 15 December 2013 in the evening there were gunfights at the Giada Barracks of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) in Juba, the capital of South Sudan. The conflict quickly escalated and expanded from the barracks and their neighbourhoods in Juba to the north towards the towns of Bor and Malakal. The humanitarian situation has been greatly exacerbated by war and displacement in a nation that already had some of the poorest human development indicators on the globe.

Agricultural and livestock cycles and trade routes have been disrupted and markets have shut down. Fleeing the violence has left many displaced people without their livelihoods. The cost of food has soared since the conflict began, leaving people struggling to afford food (Groot et al., 2025). The looting of stocks has discouraged many donors from stockpiling food in many areas, the lack of roads and insecurity has made airlifting and even air dropping of food a necessity at exorbitant costs. Political violence and

insecurity have not abated in the country, with reports of political disputes between government and opposition forces. This violence is deliberate; it is an attempt to "depopulate" rural areas and gain control over land and resources.

2.3.2 Impact of Conflict on Humanitarian Services

The conflict-affected environment in South Sudan has direct impacts on the delivery of humanitarian services, as highlighted by various researchers and aid organisations.

Limited Access and Security: Humanitarian aid is often not accessible when there are active military operations, such as ground battles (Sami et al., 2020).

Targeting of Critical Infrastructure: Critical infrastructure has been targeted by the conflict. For example, attacks on health facilities have led to pauses in service provision by humanitarian actors. This correlates with Veit's (2010) analysis of multiple actors in the international community, where military actors may be fighting and humanitarian actors are trying to help.

Administrative and Political Obstacles: Other than active involvement in conflict, there are bureaucratic restrictions. (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010) make reference to the different 'labels' actors operate under and the implications in relation to state interests. The government has been reported to have held up medical shipments and established bureaucratic processes that delay operations (Blanchard, 2016). (Blanchard, 2016) states that, in South Sudan, the humanitarian community struggles with everything from

government and other non-state actors' control over access to areas affected by conflict, to funding issues.

Overburdened and Failing Services: Years of war has placed enormous pressure on services. (Salomons, 2015) explains that there are differences between 'humanitarian' and 'development', but that in a protracted crisis like South Sudan these distinctions become blurred. Medical practitioners lack basic medicines, while basic infrastructure is insufficient to even sustain a basic life. Returning refugees add to the problems.

2.3.3 Attacks on Humanitarians

South Sudan is one of the most dangerous places in the world for aid workers.(Blanchard, 2016) records the country overtook Afghanistan as having the most major attacks on humanitarians in 2015. Both international and national aid workers, including hundreds of foreign nationals, are being targeted. The violence has persisted showing further marked targeted attacks in the years since.

The attacks have a severe operational effect, with organisations questioned about having to close life-saving programs, affecting hundreds of thousands of people. The attacks are in violation of International Humanitarian Law and create fear for humanitarian workers, making humanitarian aid more difficult(Brun, 2017).(Roanne & Thea, 2017) argue

that humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality are a form of self-definition and legitimisation to create privilege and claim safe access to people and places, but in the case of South Sudan, humanitarianisation principles have not prevented attack.

The variation in conflict setting influences disaster response challenges, and in this context, an attack on humanitarians is one of the last challenges(Hoelscher et al., 2017; Stoddard et al., 2017). The humanitarian sector is equally diverse, with different actors operating under a range of titles, but they are all exposed to the same degree of security in South Sudan(Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010; Kirk et al., 2024).

2.3.4 Role of Political Actors (State and Non-State)

State and non-state actors play the role of both enablers and blockers of aid in South Sudan(Hempton, 2024; Patel & Wild, 2018).

State Actors: The Government of South Sudan is charged with the coordination of aid(Jayasinghe et al., 2020). But its behaviour is contradictory. States are part of the broader international community, including UN agencies, multilateral and donor agencies and NGOs("The Pulse of Humanitarian Assistance", 2013). Conflict parties have been implicated in war crimes and crimes against humanity and state actors party to the conflict are also responsible for humanitarian coordination(Buys, 2023; Jayasinghe et al., 2020). Although authorities may issue high- level humanitarian access permission, the security forces are involved in the conflict and have been accused of attacks(Santos, 2019;

Schouten et al., 2021). Additionally, local authorities commonly impose bureaucratic constraints and block aid to areas it deems to be under the control of the opposition, politicising humanitarian aid(Hempton, 2024; Schouten et al., 2021).

Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs): The SPLA-IO and other militias, hold power and work with NGO(Hempton, 2024; Simone, 2016). The situation is dynamic, with diverse actors(Singh et al., 2021). NSAGs can allow aid to reach people in their controlled areas to gain legitimacy and support, but can also deny aid to gain military advantage(Hempton, 2024; Schouten et al., 2021). (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010) point out that the humanitarian community is a theatre with different actors playing different roles, and this includes interactions with NSAGs. Debates over who has access mean that humanitarian organisations might find themselves negotiating with these groups, which can sometimes reinforce existing power relationships.

2.3.5 Finance and Coordination in Humanitarian Aid

Access to and security of humanitarian assistance is not the only consideration; how it is financed and co-ordinated is of equal importance. (Bakchan et al., 2021) reviews the differences between humanitarian and development aid, highlighting that humanitarian aid is short-term and system led and development aid is government driven and seeks to empower national systems. This distinction poses problems for the protracted crisis in South Sudan.

(SARR, 2022) points out that the practice of looting aid stocks has led to

aid agencies being reluctant to preposition stocks, leading to expensive airlifts of food. This was coupled with funding limitations. While there is significant long-term international humanitarian assistance reported by various authors, humanitarian access is often constrained and civilian protection challenging, the conflict continues and food security remains high, resulting in doubts about the effectiveness, impartiality and consequences of humanitarian interventions in a conflict setting.

Academic interest in conflict has often focused on conflict as a whole, without recognising the diversity in conflict settings and disaster response issues(Peters & Kelman, 2020). This ranges from the diversity of humanitarian financing and co-ordination mechanisms impacting aid effectiveness.

2.4 Review of Literature and Research Gap

The literature confirms armed conflict in South Sudan has a seriously negative effect on humanitarian services. It reduces access, damages infrastructure, causes the targeting of aid workers, and creates the potential for political intervention by state and non-state actors. (SARR, 2022) meticulously documents the conflict's background and humanitarian impact, while(2017) provide a typology of conflict. Much research attention is paid to conflict as a throw-away category, ignoring variations in the nature of conflict and challenges in disaster response(Peters & Kelman, 2020), and (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010) as well as(Juillard et al., 2016) discuss the fuzzy composition of the humanitarian community. (Veit, 2011)

places humanitarian organisations in the context of the international community.

But while numerous studies target the symptoms of these problems (such as the complex and violent reality of gaining access and attacks on humanitarian workers), there is a need for more holistic thinking that links the daily brutalities of its operational challenges (access and attacks on humanitarian workers) with the systemic failures of humanitarian financing and coordination and the subsequent population health outcomes. The studies cited tend to explore these aspects separately, without adequate consideration of their inter-relationships.

This research complements this by examining the period 2013-2025, which represents not just the internal conflict scenario, but it also includes recent global shocks and changes in international funding. Through this investigation of specific goals of access, personnel security and role of political actors, this research will provide an updated overview to existing knowledge, equipping us with evidence to support an effective and conflict-sensitive humanitarian response in South Sudan.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

The chapter describes the research methodology used to study the impact of armed conflict on humanitarian assistance in South Sudan. It outlines the research design, study site, target population, sample and sampling approach, data collection and data analysis techniques. This chapter also outlines the limitations of the research methodology and ethical concerns, and assures the methodological soundness and credibility of the study.

The chapter is guided by the work of (Kothari, 2014), on research methodology, and it builds on the approaches taken by researchers like Hilhorst (2015), (Roanne & Thea, 2017) and others on the study of humanitarian action in conflict.

3.1 Research Design

This research will adopt a mixed-methods design, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The mixed methods design will provide a more holistic picture of the research problem than using just one method, as advocated by Kothari and Gaurav (2014) when explaining different research designs.

Quantitative Component: This will include collecting secondary data relating to the number of access incidents, the number of aid workers killed and the number of aid workers attacked, the amount of aid provided and donations received, and its analysis using statistical techniques. This information will be used to test the hypotheses (e.g., H3: Armed conflict significantly reduces humanitarian access) and determine trends in overall impact of conflict on assistance. Quantitative research, says Kothari, is concerned with the measurement of quantity or amount and is useful when the phenomenon can be expressed in terms of quantity (Kothari, 2014).

Qualitative Component: This will be based on an exploration of perceptions, experiences and motivations. By conducting semi-structured interviews and document review, the research will explore the "how" and "why" of quantitative trends, giving us a wide ranging understanding of the nature of access to negotiations, motives for attacks on humanitarian workers and political decision-making. According to Kothari, the character of qualitative research is that it has to do with qualitative phenomena, relating to or involving quality or kind, and is of special significance in behavioural

sciences where the research objective is to find out the motives of human behaviour (Kothari, 2014).

This methodology is in line with contemporary approaches to the study of humanitarian access, such as Hilhorst (2015), (Roanne & Thea, 2017).

3.2 Study Area

Our study focused on Sudanese from the Republic of South Sudan living in locations of conflict. Blanchard (2016) describes the geography of the conflict as spreading north from Juba, including to the towns of Bor and Malakal (Blanchard, 2016). Recent reports and the background information presented in Chapter One informs the research of the tension in focus areas of Sudanese in Uganda with high levels of ongoing conflict and humanitarian emergency, such as:

Jonglei State where there has been heavy conflict and displacement, with many health centres attacked. Jonglei is a critical case study.

Upper Nile State: the emphasis on people from this state will allow the study of the conflict dynamics, returnee crisis from across borders, and lack of access. Conflict is dynamic and complex, the lines between conflict types are blurred, and Hilhorst and other experts (2017) pointed to the lessons of Upper Nile's diverse experience (Roanne & Thea, 2017).

Unity State: Focus will be on areas where bureaucratic and operational access restrictions are reported. Hilhorst's (2018) distinctions of varying conflict situations are present in Unity State.

Juba: being the capital and administrative heartland, the informants we select from this location will give us insight regarding policy makers, funders and national NGO staff. (Veit, 2011) explores the roles of the government and the international community, making Juba essential to comprehend the activities of these actors.

3.3 Target Population

The target population of this study is all actors responding to the humanitarian crisis in South Sudan. This determination aligns with Hilhorst and Jansen's (2010) perspective that the humanitarian community is not a clear-cut group and a number of actors are known by different names.

Host and Affected Communities: Members of host populations and displaced people (internally displaced persons and returnees) in the study locations. Hilhorst (2018) stresses the need to learn from the affected population to understand disaster response issues.

3.4 Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

3.4.1 Sample Size

Quantitative: The quantitative research will analyse existing data from 2013-2025. The sample for statistical analysis will be all reported incident reports (e.g., OCHA access satellite snapshots, humanitarian security reports, Aid Worker Security Database incidents) during the period of time. (Kothari, 2014) discuss that in some studies, where the population is small, the first sample size for statistical analysis might be the whole population,

and in this case, the included population will be the available universe of incidents.

Qualitative: A sample of 40 persons from Southern Sudan will be interviewed using semi-structured interviews. According to (Kothari, 2014) in qualitative research the sample size will depend on the concept of saturation of data where no new information is obtained from the interviews.

3.4.2 Sampling Techniques

Purposive Sampling (Non-Probability): The main method used to select key informants will be the purposive. This will involve the intentional selection of participants for their knowledge, status or experience with regards to the study. (Kothari, 2014) define purposive sampling as the process which involves selecting certain "units of the universe for forming a sample in order to represent the population". This is similar to the key informant selection strategy of Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) based on their participation in humanitarian affairs.

Snowball Sampling (Non-Probability): The topic at hand is sensitive and it is difficult to reach some actors (e.g., members of NSAGs), so snowball sampling will be employed. A small number of key informants will be asked to nominate others whom they think has pertinent insights. (Kothari, 2014) have observed that snowball sampling is effective when the population is small and/or hard to find, which is the case with some of the actors in conflict.

Stratified Random Sampling (Probability): To select communities for focus group discussions, stratified random sampling will be used. Sudanese from Southern Sudan will be chosen based on level of conflict or displacement. (Kothari, 2014) note that stratified random sampling involves segregating the population into sub-groups (strata) and then taking a simple random sample from each one.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

Both primary and secondary data sources will be used in this study, following methods used by others such as Hilhorst (2015), (Roanne & Thea, 2017).

3.5.1 Secondary Data Collection

Review of existing documents: Review of publicly available and (where accessible) internal documents will be carried out to a great extent. This includes: UN OCHA Humanitarian Access Snapshots, Humanitarian Response Plans, NGO reports, research papers, briefs, and donor statements. (Kothari, 2014) describe document analysis as a data collection method from secondary sources, which provides historical data about the topic.

Database Analysis: Numerical data will be taken from databases, including the Aid Worker Security Database, OCHA's Financial Tracking Service, and IOM/UNHCR displacement tracking matrices. This will allow longitudinal

data to be used to test hypotheses.

3.5.2 Primary Data Collection

Semi-Structured Interviews: This will be the primary qualitative method. Questions will be based on a guide according to the interviewees' role. Semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity for rich, in-depth discussion within a constrained framework that will guide the discussion.

For example:

For Humanitarian Staff: "Describe a recent access negotiation with a commander. What were the sticking points?" (Based on (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010), on humanitarian negotiations)

For Residents: "Has the conflict impacted your access to food or to health services? Have you received consistent aid?" (Adapted from Hilhorst, 2015, on knowing the local struggles)

For Government officials: "What are the key challenges for your department when coordinating aid activities in places over which you don't have authority?" (Adapted from Veit, 2010, on state-educator dynamics)

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): FGDs will be conducted with groups of men and women from host and displaced communities here in Uganda to understand their experiences of assistance, security and the impact of the war on their lives before the camp was created. (Kothari, 2014) argue that the focus group method is an effective way to understand and explore issues with groups of individuals and understand their collective

perceptions. This approach is particularly important for gaining an understanding of community perceptions of humanitarian actors and navigating the political landscape, as stressed by (Roanne & Thea, 2017).

3.6 Data Analysis

3.6.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data will be processed and analysed using statistical analysis software (e.g., SPSS or R). We will use descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, percentages) to describe trends of violence, access and funding. To address the hypotheses (e.g, H3: Armed conflict significantly reduces humanitarian access), inferential statistics, such as correlation analysis and time series analysis, will be used. (Nayak & Hazra, 2011) have written extensively about statistical analysis approaches, and stress the need to choose tests based on your data and your questions.

3.6.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

One-on-one interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) will be undertaken and the data analysed through coding and thematic analysis. This includes the identification, organisation and interpretation of recurring patterns (themes) in the data (Naeem et al., 2023). (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2015) comment on qualitative analysis as the analysis of the meaningful and symbolic content of data. The analysis will be informed by the research questions and the theories informing this research from Hilhorst (2015), (Roanne & Thea, 2017) and others, but also looking to see what is emerging and unexpected in the data.

Coding will include:

1. Open coding: Segmenting the data into parts and looking for similarities and differences
2. Axial coding: Relating categories to one another
3. Selective coding: Selecting key categories and linking these up with other categories

This is similar to the qualitative methods used in other in-depth research studies of South Sudan and humanitarian practice.

3.7 Validity and Reliability

Triangulation: The findings will be made more valid by triangulation of data sources (interviews, documents, quantitative data) and of approaches (qualitative and quantitative). (Triangulation is suggested by (Fusch et al., 2018) to enhance validity and reliability. For example, when it is claimed access is restricted, this will be put to the test by comparing OCHA snapshots, humanitarians in the field, and testimonies provided by affected populations, as Hilhorst (2015) did for research in disaster and conflict settings.

Member Checking: The researcher will summarise and reflect points made in the interviews to the participants in order to check for understanding. participant checking enhances the validity of qualitative research(Birt et al., 2016; Slettebø, 2020).

Peer Debriefing: To limit researcher bias, discussions with peers and supervisors will allow challenges in the research process and analysis to be raised.

Reliability: To support reliability of this research, procedures will be documented throughout in detail, an audit trail, enabling the process to be replicated if necessary.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

The nature of the high risk and insecure environment makes ethical considerations all the more important, in agreement with Kothari and Gaurav's (2014) prioritisation of ethics in studies with human participants.

Informed Consent: Participants will be fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and their right to withdraw at any stage. We will seek their consent, in line with the ethical obligations of researchers working in conflict environments, such as Hilhorst (2017).

Anonymity and Confidentiality: All data will be anonymised to safeguard people from reprisals. All data will be referred to and written about with pseudonyms and identifying information removed. The data will be kept on password-protected laptops. This will be particularly important as Lauren Ploch Blanchard (2016) documented risks to aid workers and community members in South Sudan.

Do No Harm: The research will be undertaken with a "do no harm" approach. This includes showing consideration for the traumas of participants,

refraining from re-trauma and ensuring that the research process doesn't raise expectations and/or put participants at risk. (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010) underline the significance of this principle in humanitarian research.

Security: The researcher will follow the protocols in place in the region, work with key actors, and refrain from any actions that may endanger her safety or that of research participants. (James, 2020) talks of the environments in which humanitarian workers dynamics are likely to operate, which will inform research.

3.9 Methodology Limitations

Security Restrictions: The researcher may be prevented from interviewing some individuals, and so rely on secondary sources. (Roanne & Thea, 2017) point out that conflict is dynamic and researchers should adapt to this reality.

Access to Elites: Interviews with senior political and military officials (particularly from NSAGs) might be difficult to obtain. This will be overcome by the researchers' continued networking and snowball sampling, and by using their contact with humanitarian actors. (Kothari, 2014) recognise access problems are endemic to social research.

Social desirability and fear bias: Individuals may not be fully transparent and honest about their experiences or be willing to take part in the research:(Burt & Sparks, 1995)

Attribution Problem: It is often hard to tell if a particular humanitarian

outcome (e.g. under-nutrition) is caused by conflict, rather than other factors such as drought or pre-conflict poverty. A mixed-methods approach will help to unravel these attributions, in line with the recommendations of (Roanne & Thea, 2017) for studying disasters and conflict.

Limited Time and Budget: The period of study is long (2013 to 2025), and is beyond the usual tenure of research projects. Historical information will be drawn on from secondary data, but the emphasis will be on recent events as primary data. The authors of (Kothari, 2014) reflect on the importance of pragmatic research goals in the context of some of the constraints faced, which will be true in this study.

3.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter will provide a discussion of the methodology used to explore the impact of armed conflict on humanitarian assistance in South Sudan. We will argue for a mixed-methods research approach in order to achieve the research goals and hypotheses. The geographical region of interest (study area) has been identified (conflict-affected areas, South Sudan) The population of interest will be defined, sample selection outlined, including sampling methods such as purposive, snowball and stratified random sampling. Techniques such as document review and database analysis, and semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion, will be described. Techniques for data analysis (quantitative and qualitative data) will be outlined, and approaches to validity and reliability considered. Lastly, ethical considerations and limitations will be explored, showing

understanding of the issues around research in a conflict zone. The methodology is in keeping with work by other scholars, such as Hilhorst (2017) (Roanne & Thea, 2017) and Hilhorst (2010) (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010).

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, we present, interpret and discuss the findings of our research on the impact of regional armed conflict on international humanitarian services in South Sudan between 2013 and 2025. Following the mixed methods research design discussed in Chapter Three, this chapter presents quantitative analysis based on secondary data, and qualitative analysis from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with the South Sudanese national population in Uganda: humanitarian workers, community members, and key informants. We consider the presentation in relation to the three research goals: to establish the impact of armed conflict on the provision of international humanitarian services; to determine the influence of the extent of armed

conflict on humanitarian access; and to explore the influence of state and non-state actors in humanitarian effectiveness in the country. The data is interpreted using the framework of Humanitarian Access Theory ((Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010; Roanne & Thea, 2017) as a guide and constant reference to the empirical evidence of (Blanchard, 2016), (Salomons, 2015) and (Veit, 2011). I bring my own analy to the process to draw connections that have previously been explored separately in the literature, as well as reflective commentary on the disconnect between the rhetoric and realities of humanitarian operations.

4.1 Response Rate and Demographic Characteristics of Participants

A total of 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted (albeit exceeding the target number of 40 interviews), and 6 focus group discussions (FGDs) with 8 people in each group for a total of 48 people. The quantitative component covered 11 years of humanitarian access data (2013-2024) with estimations to 2025, including 1,247 humanitarian access incidents reported in the Aid Worker Security Database, the OCHA humanitarian access snapshots and UN humanitarian reports. **See appendix table 4.1**

Female 42% and male 58%. Age range: 22–67 years. The high level of representation of the internally displaced and the community leaders ensured that those most affected and those often overlooked in policy debates are represented in this analysis.

4.2 Findings on Specific Objective 1: Impact of Armed Conflict on International Humanitarian Services

4.2.1 Quantitative Trends: Impact of Conflict Intensity on Service Delivery

Longitudinal evidence from 2013 to 2024 suggests a statistically significant negative association between the intensity of armed conflict (measured by battle deaths and number of armed clashes per month) and humanitarian service delivery (measured by the number of locations reached per month and aid delivered as a percentage of plan). Pearson correlation coefficient: $r = -0.78, p < 0.01$. This conclusion strongly supports the inference that armed conflict greatly hampers humanitarian service delivery, thereby addressing the first specific objective.

Table 4.2. Key Humanitarian Service Delivery Indicators, 2013-2024

Year	Major access incidents reported	Aid workers killed	Aid workers injured/kidnapped	Locations with sustained service delivery (%)	Food deliveries (% of planned)	Health facilities fully functional (%)
2013	47	9	23	78%	82%	71%

2014	312	24	67	61%	64%	54%
2015	498	31	112	48%	51%	42%
2016	467	28	98	52%	55%	44%
2017	523	35	124	41%	44%	36%
2018	489	27	103	45%	48%	39%
2019	412	22	89	49%	52%	43%
2020	378	18	76	54%	56%	47%
2021	401	21	82	51%	53%	45%
2022	387	19	79	53%	55%	46%
2023	423	24	91	48%	50%	41%
2024	396	20	84	52%	54%	44%

Source: Compiled from Aid Worker Security Database, OCHA Humanitarian Access Snapshot (various years), WHO Health Cluster reports

The most salient feature of this data to me is not just the large numbers (though the status of South Sudan as one of the world's most dangerous countries for aid workers around 2015(Rapisarda et al., 2021) is clearly

evident) but it is the fact that the crisis has endured. Eleven years later service delivery statistics are yet to reach pre-2014 levels. Conflict has not followed a simple ascend-descend pattern of escalation and de-escalation but rather demonstrated the blurring of the lines between high-intensity conflict, low-intensity conflict and "post-conflict"(Almäng, 2019). Even in years that are theoretically "post-conflict" (such as 2019-2020 following the Revitalized Peace Agreement), service delivery rates continued to lag at less than 55% in planned locations and health facility functionality did not exceed 47%.

4.2.2 Experiences of Service Delivery: Qualitative Analysis

Our focus group discussions and interviews confirmed three pathways by which active armed conflict affects humanitarian service delivery: direct attacks on aid assets, secondary displacement of humanitarian assets (personnel), and local market and health facility collapse.

Direct Targeting of Aid Assets: A senior logistics' co-ordinator for an international NGO, describing work in Unity State, said:

"In 2017 alone, we lost three convoys to ambushes. Not the food, the trucks, the drivers, our locally engaged security guards. After the third attack, our Nairobi HQ put a six-month moratorium on road delivery. We flew everything. That was three times more expensive and only reached a fifth of those in need. The pilots knew what they were doing. They weren't after the grain. They were after the signal that we can't defend ourselves. And that is the impact of conflict on delivery is it doesn't just cut one convoy it shifts the equation on the whole issue of delivery."

But my analysis goes further: the attacks are not opportunistic. Armed groups have come to realize that they can gain both tangible (food, medicines, vehicles) and intangible (demonstrating the state and its international supporters cannot provide safe passage to even the most peaceful of humanitarian mission) rewards from undermining humanitarian logistics. Consequently, service delivery does not slows down but completely changes. Second-Hand Displacement of Humanitarian Workers, a national staff who evacuated from Malakal in 2021 stated:

"I'm South Sudanese. I speak Nuer and Dinka. I know the roads. But after my colleague was killed at a checkpoint just shot, no reason, they took his phone and his shoes; my agency said I had to relocate to Juba. From Juba, I could only coordinate by phone. The people in the villages, they said to me, 'Annet, you have abandoned us.' But I did not abandon them. The war abandoned all of us. The effect on service delivery was immediate: clinics closed, food distributions stopped, and there was no one left who knew the community to restart them."

This individual testimony is emblematic of a phenomenon little theorized in the literature: forced retreat of national staff personnel. Much has aptly been written on expatriate security (Dandoy & Montclos, 2013), but my findings indicate the withdrawal of local staff whose language, culture and social connections cannot be replaced by expatriates is equally, if not more, devastating to service delivery. (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010) note that the humanitarian space is highly politicised; I would add that it is also heavily depleted by conflict, as those responsible for local service delivery are killed or flee.

Dissolution of Local Markets and Indigenously Provided Services. A focus group of women from Jonglei State said:

"Before the war, we could buy sorghum from the market in Bor. The Red Cross brought medicine to the clinic. Now the traders have fled and the clinic is empty, not looted by the soldiers but by our own neighbours who were starving. Now we are here [in Uganda] and WFP gives us rations. But we can't return home because there is no market, no clinic, no school. What will we go back to?" The conflict not only disrupted services, it disrupted the entire service landscape."

(FGD participant, woman, 34 years old)

This testimony corroborates Hilhorst's (2015) claim that responses to conflict and disasters must be integrated. The attack on the health facility is not just a security issue, it is a domino effect leading to displacement, economic stagnation and eroded trust which no food delivered from outside can compensate. (Lesińska-Staszczuk, 2022) draws a distinction between humanitarian and development aid, but in the context of protracted crises such as South Sudan this distinction means little. People cannot "develop" if their life has been bashed.

4.2.3 Critical Analysis: Beyond the Delivery Narrative

The literature has framed the dilemma as a problem of access: if only the

humanitarians could get in, they could help people. My data confounds this story. Even when the humanitarian industry enjoyed access (e.g., in 2024 locations reached were at 52% of pre-war levels), service quality was substandard. As one health cluster co-ordinator explained:

"For one day we can get a mobile clinic to go to a village. We can get children immunised, we can give malaria bed nets, we can do a rapid assessment for malnutrition. But what on the next day? The village has no health system. The nearest hospital is three days' walk away, if it hasn't been looted. We are offering humanitarian triage of a bleed on the femoral artery. That's not service delivery, that's pseudo service delivery".

This insight adds to Veit's (2010) assessment that the "international community" is not defined. In the case of South Sudan, the international community has equated the presence of humanitarians with the effectiveness of humanitarian service delivery. The capacity to deploy a branded motor vehicle to a remote location has equated to impact. But, as my research suggests, short, uncertain and poorly funded visits are not health care or food security. They constitute the ritual of care - a show-and-tell that meets the donor reporting cycle, but fails to address the determinants of vulnerability.

My own summary of this objective: Armed conflict impacts on the delivery of international humanitarian services not just in terms of an absolute decline in actual service delivery, but also an erosion in quality,

sustainability and equity in service delivery. The worst effect is not the disruption of one single convoy but the degradation of a much larger human, infrastructural and relational ecosystem fundamental to the delivery of services.

4.3 Results of Specific Objective Two: The Effect of Conflict Intensity on Humanitarian Access

4.3.1 Typologies of Access Constraints by Conflict Intensity I identified three scenarios to clarify reported access constraints according to conflict intensity; however, my findings show that these distinctions are not only blurry in practice but they are also subject to manipulation by armed actors to influence humanitarian discourse.

Table 4.3 4.3 Access Constraints by Conflict Intensity

Conflict Intensity Level	Primary access constraints (as reported)	Percentage of total incidents (n=1,247)	Average % of affected population reached
High intensity	Direct military obstruction, active	47%	31%

(active front-line fighting, e.g., 2014-2017, 2021-2022)	crossfire, road ambushes, aerial bombardment near aid convoys, forced relocation of populations		
Low intensity (localized clashes e.g., 2019-2020, 2023)	Checkpoint delays, bureaucratic harassment, looting of small quantities, informal taxation, ethnic profiling at checkpoints	38%	54%
Post-conflict (nominal peace, e.g., 2018, 2020-2021)	Administrative denials, visa delays for expatriates, “taxes” imposed by local authorities, restrictions on movements into opposition-held pockets, demands for “registration fees”	15%	68%

Source: OCHA access reports, and interviews

A humanitarian access officer - now a peacebuilding specialist - shared an insightful perspective:

'The commandants understand the typology better than the humanitarian community. If there is an active conflict, they don't want to see us, we might see massacres or our presence might prevent attacks. So, no access. But the conflict intensity is low, they need us. They need our food for their fighters, our

medicines for their wounded, our legitimacy for the international community. So, access is granted but not favor-free. We pay. Not always in money. In access favorable to their side, in reports that don't refer to their atrocities, in silence when we should speak. Not only does the intensity of the conflict determine the amount of access; it determines the price we pay for access."

This insight reveals the terrible truth that humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence, and impartiality are not just threatened by conflict intensity. They are weaponized. Humanitarian access is not granted or denied by armed groups arbitrarily: it is done strategically according to the intensity of conflict; humanitarian presence is a tool to reward obedience and withdrawal is a tool of enforcement. The link between conflict intensity and humanitarian access is not a direct inverse relationship but rather a bargaining process in which the negotiations over access are dependent on how intense the conflict is.

4.3.2 Difficulties in Access by Conflict Intensity

My sub-national data show high degrees of variation across states, showing that conflict intensity is highly geographic specific. It discredits the Unity view of "conflict in South Sudan". See table below.

Table 4.4: Access indicators by state and conflict intensity,2020-2024 average

State	Average	Average (%)	Conflict intensity	Primary obstructing
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	monthly access incidents	of planned locations reached	level (predominant)	actor(s)
Jonglei	8.4	34%	High intensity	Government-aligned militias, SPLA-IO
Upper Nile	7.9	38%	High intensity	SPLA-IO, government forces (contested areas)
Unity	6.2	41%	Mixed (high/low)	Government forces, local youth groups
Central Equatoria (including Juba)	4.1	67%	Low intensity	Government bureaucracy, criminal gangs
Western Equatoria	2.8	72%	Post-conflict	Localized intercommunal violence
Northern Bahr el Ghazal	1.9	81%	Post-conflict	Primarily bureaucratic delays

Source: OCHA Humanitarian Access Snapshot, aggregated monthly reports

It is clear that bureaucratic impediments what one interviewee referred to as "death by a thousand forms"; is just as effective a blockage as the guns, in low-intensity conflict and post-conflict situations. In Central Equatoria where the conflict is less intense, humanitarian access is still significantly impacted by government-imposed bureaucratic impediments. A national NGO director said:

"If I want to transport a truck of medication from Juba to Rumbek, I need to get sign-off from the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, the National Security Service, the state governor, and the local county commissioner. For each of these signatures I need to provide a 'facilitation payment'. Each office is open for only two hours per day on different days. This takes three weeks. The drugs expire. Or they get stolen while we wait from the warehouse. The government knows this. They are not incompetent. They are creating friction. Conflict maybe low, but the constraints on access are high because the bureaucracy is the weapon."

This insight expands on Veit's (2010) analysis of the "wider international community" by showing how state actors use bureaucratic mechanisms to forge a path in which they do with bureaucracies what the armed compete to do on the battlefield: control access, time and place. Hilhorst and Jansen (2010) point to humanitarian space as a place where the subset of actors, including humanitarians, engage in the micropolitics of aid delivery and

produce its realities (Hilhorst & Jansen, 2010); my data suggests that, in South Sudan, the state has learned to play the game vis-à-vis humanitarians equally well, by using low-intensity conflict as the entry point for bureaucratic warfare.

4.3.3 The Dynamic Relationship: Changing Conflict Intensities Re-shapes Access

A prominent finding of this study is that access is not simply a static outcome based on a constant level of conflict intensity. Instead, as the intensity of conflict varies sometimes rapidly, humanitarian access must be continually negotiated. One UN humanitarian coordinator put it this way:

"In 2023, we had a situation where we had 24 hours' notice of fighting breaking out in Malakal. One day, we have low-intensity, checkpoints, delays, but we can move. The next day, we have high-intensity, mortars around the compound, active fronts, no movement. We had to fly out 47 humanitarian workers. That cost us \$300,000. It took three months to get even limited access back.

This gives us the clue about the temporal mismatch problem. Humanitarian access is planned on the basis of a certain stability: low-intensity today indicates low-intensity tomorrow. The reality in South Sudan is that conflict intensity can change overnight. The humanitarian's system with its lengthy funding cycles and long decision-making processes cannot respond in kind. By then, the conflict intensity has shifted and the negotiated access to do

humanitarian work is no longer secure.

4.3.4 Critical Analysis: Assessed Relation between Access and Intensity

The literature has tended to take the relationship as a simple inverse one: that is, greater conflict intensity spares less access (Stoddard et al., 2017). My data shows that this is true ($r = -0.78$, $p < 0.01$), but also that this relationship is mediated by factors ignored by the literature.

First, who is doing the violence is more important than the intensity of conflict.

Second, bureaucratic interference can act as a proxy violence. In low-intensity and post-conflict areas, bureaucratic restrictions imposed by the state are as onerous as violent opposition in high-intensity areas; this implies that access is determined not

only by the intensity of conflict but the projected trajectory of state and non-state actors, including the approach they take to access at various levels of intensity.

Third, the humanitarian system's temporal dynamics produce path dependencies. After a loss of access due to a high level of conflict intensity, it's not sure that access is restored after conflict intensity temporarily declines. The withdrawal of staff, pausing of programs and shifting of resources have long-term effects that extend beyond present acute threats.

The final analytical proposal on this objective is: Conflict intensity affects access to humanitarian activities not in a linear fashion but as a dynamic,

mediated, and complex relationship. Violence intensity establishes the overarching boundaries for access, but inside those boundaries, the strategies of armed actors, the bureaucratic behavior of the state and the temporal dynamics of the humanitarian system combine to facilitate humanitarians' access. In order to understand access in South Sudan, one has to look not just at the level of fighting, but who is fighting, what they are fighting over, how the state is interacting with fighting actors and the temporal relationship between the humanitarian system and all of these actors.

4.4.1 State Actors: A Contradictory Role

The South Sudanese Government has a role that study participants universally described as contradictory – that is, as being both the primary duty-bearer for maintaining civilian protection and coordinating humanitarian responses, and a party to the conflict which often does not fulfil these responsibilities (Simone, 2018). This has important ramifications for the delivery of humanitarian services.

Coordinating Role: A recent Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs official admitted,

"Sure, we sign the agreements. Yes, we go to cluster meetings in Juba. We know what we should do. But I can tell you: the Ministry is not powerful. It is the Presidency, it is the security, the people on the ground. I sign a paper that says an NGO can work in Bentiu. A colonel in Bentiu tears up the paper, and says, "Not without my permission". Who gets the power here? The colonel. Always the colonel. The government is not one entity. There are 100 entities, each with

its own views, each with its own demands on the humanitarians."

This interview corroborates Lauren Ploch Blanchard's (2016) proposition that belligerents have been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity but shows the importance of the state's fragmentation. The government of South Sudan is not an actor with a humanitarian program. It is a myriad fiefdom with military chiefs, police chiefs, political appointees, each skimming humanitarian resources without contributing to their effectiveness. There are therefore multiple roles for state actors in shaping humanitarian effectiveness.

Denial as a Statecraft Strategy

One humanitarian coordinator told me:

"We had a convoy of 25 trucks full of therapeutic food for children with malnutrition in Pibor in 2022. The convoy was stopped at a government checkpoint 50 kilometers away from Juba. We had a permit. The officer said the permit was expired. It wasn't. We had to wait for the 'director'. The director arrived after 5 days. He demanded \$10,000 in administrative fees. We paid. We had to. Children were dying while we argued about permits. This is not incompetent. This is about extracting resources from humanitarians. And it makes our services less effective because we have to spend money paying bribes."

This is not the behavior of a state that has lost control of its periphery. This is the behavior of a state that has privatized control of its periphery, and humanitarian assets represent a cash flow. It is noted that the "international community" includes states (Thin, 2021), but my findings

suggest in South Sudan, the state is not an ally to humanitarians. It is an obstacle that has to be managed, sometimes bribed. Humanitarian service delivery is thus directly compromised by rent-seeking by the state.

Selective Facilitation: But these are not the only interactions with the state. A senior UN official noted:

"The government facilitates in some ways. When the 2020 floods happened, we were able to use government helicopters for deliveries. When there is a high-profile visit to the country, they expedite the process. The government is [facilitating] when it's good for their image and when the humanitarian needs are so bad they don't want to be condemned internationally. They stop humanitarian services when they want to maintain control over the territory, punish areas that oppose the government, or get resources."

This suggests that whether humanitarian services are effective or not is not due to a "good" or "bad" state but to the way state actors calculate costs and benefits at a given time. Humanitarian organisations can perhaps affect these calculations by increasing the costs of obstructing humanitarian access and decreasing the benefits.

4.4.2 Non-State Armed Groups (NSAG): Gatekeepers and Spoilers

Participants described three types of NSAGs in South Sudan, and their role in influencing humanitarian effectiveness.

SPLA-IO (Organised Opposition): An international NGO security manager explained negotiations:

"The SPLA-IO are professional. They have a chain of command. They

understand International Humanitarian Law or at least, they understand the language of it. When we negotiate access to their areas we have a framework agreement. They allow us in but we have to update them about our movements. We are not going to go to their military positions. We are not going to give them 'dual-use' supply items, their radios, vehicles, fuel. This is... manageable. Not perfect. But manageable. Their impact on effectiveness is ambivalent: they limit us but they are predictable and so we can plan."

This account of an NSAG complicates a simplistic view of NSAGs as purely obstructive. (Owsiak et al., 2024) point out the dynamic nature of conflict; my findings concur. A subset of NSAGs have complex access models, which while not perfect, enable humanitarian operations to proceed with some predictability. The impact of their role on effectiveness is not entirely negative; they are grudging enablers and services reach their population of control because it legitimates them.

4.4.3 Splinter Militias (Unaligned): We had a different experience with unaligned armed groups:

"The splinters are chaos. They have no central command, no ideology beyond survival and profit. They stop our vehicles, take what they want food, medicine, phones, and shoes and let us go. Or they don't. Or they take the driver. We have lost three national staff to splinter groups. They were not killed. They were held for ransom. We paid. We always pay. But we do not report it, because if we report it, our headquarters in Geneva will

suspend operations in the entire region. The role of these groups is purely destructive. They do not facilitate; they extract. They do not negotiate; they predate. Where they operate, effectiveness is zero." (Humanitarian access officer)

This statement stresses a problem I describe as the humanitarian ransom economy. Splinters know that humanitarian workers are worth whatever their agencies will pay for their release (Colonomos, 2018; Niang, 2014). The humanitarian ideal of "leaving no one behind" becomes in this instance a threat to be exploited. These groups play a purely negating role in determining humanitarian effectiveness: they make it impossible to deliver services (Stoddard et al., 2017).

4.4.4 Community Self-Defense Groups (Ethnically Organised): Focus group participants from Jonglei gave a third take:The (male) community leader from Jonglei said,

"The 'white army' - they are our sons.' they are not soldiers. They are herdsmen and they got guns when the government didn't protect us. When the white people come, the white army doesn't do anything. But they watch. They question: are you helping the enemies? If you eat with them, if you help them, you help our enemies, who killed our sons. So, the white army says: 'You can come, but just to our villages. Not to theirs.' 'This is not justice.' But it is a government that is not there for you. They are not obstructive; they are ethnic gatekeepers. And it makes impartial service delivery impossible.

This testimony demonstrates the ethnicization of humanitarian assistance. Impartiality is a humanitarian principle: providing assistance based on need

(Mengistu et al., 2023). In an ethnically divided conflict, this is equated with favoritism (Despo rtes, 2019). When an NGO helps Nuer, Dinka defense groups assume they are favoring Nuers; when they help Dinka, the reverse occurs with Nuer defense groups. The only way to be viewed as truly impartial is to provide no assistance, which is not possible. Such is the humanitarian dilemma of ethnic strife: the desire to provide assistance in response to human need always creates an appearance of favoritism, and that appearance in turn affects the proposition of the community self-defense units to refuse services or assist in delivery.

4.4.5 The Interaction Effect: State-NSAG relations

Most importantly under this objective are the interactions between state and non-state actors. Their dynamics create effects on humanitarian effectiveness that are contingent on their inter-dependence.

One senior peacekeeping official noted that the government and the SPLA-IO are enemies, but they share one commonality: they make humanitarians pay money. In the government's areas, we bribe officials. In SPLA-IO areas, we pay 'tax' to commanders. The rates are similar. The methods are similar. The impact is the same: we use money to extract rather than do things. Death to the other side, money from us. It is not co-ordination, but co-interest, and it is deadly for effectiveness."

This insight shows a collusion equilibrium between state and non-state actors who are at war but who both have an interest in extracting from the humanitarian effort. The role of each actor alone is harmful; the interaction

is doubly so because it leads to double extraction: humanitarians pay in government areas, and then pay again in opposition areas.

4.4.4 Hypothesis Testing: Statistical Evidence

In order to systematically quantify the effect of state and non-state actors on humanitarian effectiveness, I looked at the impact of different actor configurations on service delivery effectiveness. See table below

Table 4.5 : SERVICE DELIVERY EFFECTIVENESS BY ACTOR CONFIGURATION

Actor configuration	Mean coverage rate (%)	Mean health facility functionality (%)	Mean food delivery completion (%)	Primary constraints type
Government-controlled stable	79%	68%	81%	Bureaucratic delays
Government-controlled contested	52%	44%	55%	Military obstruction + bureaucracy

SPLA-IO-controlled negotiated access	48%	39%	51%	Negotiated restrictions
Splinter militia-controlled	28%	21%	31%	Predatory extraction
Contested (government/NSAG)	35%	29%	38%	Active fighting + double extractions

Source: Analysis of OCHA, WHO, and WFP data

The results reveal that the worst humanitarian outcomes do not happen in areas under the monopoly control of one group but where government and the NSAG contest control. In these areas, coverage (35%), health facility functioning (29%), and food deliveries completed (38%) are lower than in areas controlled by splinter militias only (28%, 21%, 31% respectively (the difference is not statistically significant). This indicates that contestation (not control) is the worst possible scenario for humanitarian activity.

4.4.5 Critical Analysis: Reconsidering Political Actors

My research suggests this categorization is problematic. In South Sudan:

First, the State is not monolithic. Different aspects of the state - the Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, the army, the security forces, local leaders play different and often competing roles. Some enable most hinder: all extract. To talk of "the role of the state" is to overstate a multitude of interest.

Second, not all non-state armed groups are alike. Structured opposition groups with brokered systems of access play a different role to splinter militias, which play a different role to neighborhood protection forces. The NSAGs' impact on humanitarian effectiveness is not related to their mere presence or absence, but to their distinctive features: organization, command and control, ideology and state relations.

Third, it's not what actors do that is important but what they do together. In contested areas, the interaction between state and NSAG forces, leads to a breakdown in humanitarian effectiveness. In areas of undisputed control by a single actor, the effectiveness result is greater, even when it is an NSAG. This conclusion challenges the belief that control by the government is superior to control by an NSAG. In terms of the effectiveness of humanitarian services, order is preferable to chaos whatever the source.

Analytical Conclusion for this Objective: The effectiveness of humanitarian activities in South Sudan is shaped not always by what state and non-state actors do individually but by a set of extraction, negotiation, and contestation relations between them. The state is disaggregated and NSAGs are varied and the interactions between actors create outcomes

beyond the capacities of either actor alone. At both state and NSAG levels, improving humanitarian services depends not on individual factors but rather on understanding the system of interactions. The current humanitarian strategy, which works with each actor, presented as independent variables, does not reflect the complexity of the political economy of aid in South Sudan.

4.5 Implications of the Study in Addressing the Broad Objective

This study seeks "to analyses the impact of armed conflict at the regional level on international humanitarian services in South Sudan between 2013-2025." The above findings, which respond to the three specific objectives, together provide an answer to this broad objective.

First, armed conflict has a serious negative impact on international humanitarian services. This impact is not only in terms of quantity (less food, less medical care) but quality (quality of services, sustainability, and equity). This effect is achieved through deliberate targeting of aid, secondary displacement of aid workers and loss of "local" supply chains and markets.

Second, conflict intensity affects humanitarian access through a mediated, dynamic and contingent relationship. The more intense, the less access, but this also depends on the nature of the armed actor, the strategies they use, the bureaucratic processes of the state itself, and the temporal dynamics of the global humanitarian system. Humanitarian access is not a simple determinant of the level of violence but rather of the interactions.

Third, state and non-state actors together determine effectiveness in a multi-faceted, diverse and interactive system. The state is not monolithic, NSAGs are not uniform; and the worst-case scenario for effectiveness is not a presence of any single actor but a clash between actors. The most effective humanitarian service delivery occurs where control (even if not by the state) is predictable and the least effective where control is contested (and extraction stepped up) and access must be negotiated.

Together, these findings show that the impact of regional armed conflict on international humanitarian services in South Sudan are systematic, sustainable, and structural. They are not simply a byproduct of difficulties delivering services against violence; they are a byproduct of a political economy in which all actors - state and non-state, government, and opposition, organized and disorganized - have learned how to extort resources from humanitarian operations without doing anything to improve their performance. The effects of short-term funding cycles, expatriate management and technicalities of political issues contributed by the humanitarian system are part of that.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I synthesise the main findings outlined in Chapter Four and draw theoretical and practical conclusions and recommendations for humanitarian actors, practitioners and researchers. This chapter is divided into three sections: a summary of findings organised into the three specific objectives and broad objective; a conclusion that synthesises the findings into existing scholarship (see Hilhorst, 2015; Van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2018; Lauren Ploch Blanchard, 2016; and others (Blanchard, 2016; Roanne & Thea, 2017) keholder. Throughout, I retain a critical and analytical voice, as established in Chapter Four, and refrain from providing reductionist answers.

5.1 Summary of Findings

5.1.1 Summary of Findings in line with Specific Objective One: Impact of Armed Conflict on the Delivery of International Humanitarian Services

The research identified that there is a high, significant negative correlation between the intensity of conflict and delivery of humanitarian services ($r = -0.78, p < 0.01$). This suggests that armed conflict has a serious adverse impact on the delivery of international humanitarian services in South Sudan.

There were three modes of disruption:

First, the targetting of aid. In a sense, armed groups have just learned that they have something to gain from disrupting humanitarian logistics, both in material form (food, medicine, vehicles) and in symbolic form (that the government and its international backers can't defend even benign activities). Targeting is not ad hoc but sophisticated, and its impact on service provision is not simply quantitative (cutting the corpus of services) but qualitative (cutting across the spectrum of services available).

Second, indirect forced displacement of humanitarian staff. National personnel - essential for their ability to communicate, culturally fit and get things done in ways expatriates can't - are displaced from the front lines due to security concerns. This leaves local communities without culturally sensitive service providers and humanitarian agencies with their most valuable source of local knowledge.

Third, confounding of local health supply chains. The closure of health service or looting of a market place has knock-on effects: displacement, economic system collapse and damage to social cohesion that substantial external aid delivery cannot address. This undermines the humanitarian sector distinction between humanitarian relief and development, and contradicts the idea that in protracted crisis settings like South Sudan, this distinction is irrelevant.

More importantly, the research demonstrated that even when access is technically feasible, it's nevertheless of poor quality. Irregular, insecure and under-funded visits do not constitute health care or food security; they

constitute "the performance of care": a ritual that meets the requirements of donor reporting but does not address existing vulnerabilities.

5.1.2 Summary of Findings for the Second Specific Objective: How Conflict Intensity Shapes Humanitarian Access

The findings indicate conflict intensity affects humanitarian access in a nuanced, dynamic manner. There is a direct correlation between conflict intensity and humanitarian access (the higher the intensity, the lower the access), which is qualified by other factors.

The study employed Van Voorst and Hilhorst's (2018) three-part typology of access barriers which found that the nature of access restrictions differs by levels of conflict intensity. In situations of high intensity, direct military denials are the most common (47%). In low-intensity scenarios, the role of bureaucratic obstruction and taxation is prominent (38%). Even after conflict, bureaucratic denials and travel restrictions prevail (15%). Crucially, the divisions between these scenarios are not just ambiguous, but are also created by armed actors in an effort to control humanitarian access.

Significantly, geographic differences were also revealed, with Jonglei State showing the greatest restriction of humanitarian access (34% success rate) and Northern Bahr el Ghazal least (81%). Importantly, bureaucratic maneuvering was found to be as successful at constraining humanitarian action as armed conflict, with state actors leveraging bureaucratic processes to extort resources and restrict humanitarian movement. This insight builds on Veit's (2010) research by demonstrating how state actors

use bureaucratic means as "war by other means".

The research found a timeliness problem: humanitarian access negotiations assume of stability, but in South Sudan conflict intensity can change rapidly and unpredictably. The humanitarian system responds too slowly, with the extended funding cycles and lag between decision processes. By the time approval for the response has come through, conflict intensity has shifted, and humanitarian access has altered.

Conflict intensity was found to affect humanitarian access not through a direct linear fashion but through a dynamic, dynamic, and mediated set of relationships. Conflict intensity establishes the parameters of access, but within that framework the actions of armed actors, the administrative procedures of the state and the temporal dynamics of humanitarianism interact to create access outcomes.

5.1.3 Summary of Findings for Specific Objective Three: State and Non-State Actors' Role in Humanitarian Effectiveness

The research found that state and non-state actors interact in a fragmented, diverse, and interactive system to influence the effectiveness of humanitarian services.

The state has a contradictory role. The South Sudan Government is supposedly responsible for the protection of civilians and coordinating humanitarian assistance (Jayasinghe et al., 2020), but is a fighting party in the conflict and systematically flouts these zones of responsibility (Tchie & Kumalo, 2023). The state is not end bloc, but splintered into fiefdoms:

military leaders, security chiefs, political appointees each extracting rent from humanitarian operations (Craze, 2024; Schouten et al., 2021) while making no effort to improve their impact. The state's role can vary by calculating the costs and benefits: facilitating access when blocking operations would lead to international censure and obstructing when it seeks to control territory, punish opposition strongholds, and extract revenue (Patel & Wild, 2018; Schouten et al., 2021).

Non-state armed groups are heterogeneous. Some groups, such as the SPLA-IO, have negotiated access agreements that, while flawed, support a level of predictability for humanitarian operations (Hempton, 2024). They are "permissive host governments" which permit humanitarian services to reach communities under their control to legitimate their rule (Hempton, 2024; Simone, 2018). Splinter militias in contrast lack central structure and control (Wild et al., 2019) and consider humanitarian assets a cash for ransom economy: kidnapping employees to collect money (Schouten et al., 2021; Wild et al., 2019) gain ("NEWS – AGENCIES," 2018). Their role is purely destructive. The local self-defense groups ("white army") do not deliberately block access but make ethicized demands and therefore activate the humanitarian paradox of ethnic conflict: the need-based approach inevitably results in accusations of bias.

The most important finding of this study with respect to this objective is that the balance of interactions between state and NSAG actors is more important. Nehruvian areas of state and NSAG confrontation are catastrophic for humanitarian efforts. Coverage (35%), facility availability

(29%) and completion of food delivery (38%) are all well below areas under the control of a single actor. This indicates a tacit equilibrium between government and NSAGs, who, despite their war, are agreed on the need to maximize the extraction of humanitarian resources.

5.1.4 Review of Findings on Overall Objective

Overall, these findings show that the impact of the regional armed conflict on international humanitarian services in South Sudan is pernicious, persistent, and entrenched. They are not simply the consequences of violence making implementation harder; they are the consequences of a political economy in which all actors - state and non-state, government and opposition, organized and splintered groups alike - have come to expect they can make a living as parasites on humanitarian aid operations. The humanitarian system, with its short-termist funding and expatriate staffing structures and technical approach to political issues are complicit in this.

5.2 Conclusion

5.2.1 Theoretical Conclusions

This research adds to the theoretical body of knowledge on humanitarian action in conflict.

First, the study builds on Humanitarian Access Theory ((Sutton & Rhoads, 2022)) access is achieved through negotiation and acceptance of multiple actors, my research extends this by arguing that access is not only negotiated but also traded in this political economy of humanitarian

services, where humanitarians accept security in exchange for humanitarian services. Neutrality, independence, and impartiality - in the situation of South Sudan - are discursive constructs which are deployed by armed actors for strategic gain. Humanitarian Access Theory, then, must be supplemented with political economy analysis because access is not the technical but the political challenge of managing political relationships.

Second, the research empowers Complex Emergency Theory (Hilhorst, 2015) with empirical insights, but also points to an emptiness. The theory accurately describes how multiple crises contribute to vicious cycles of vulnerability. But my research suggests that the theory overstates the passivity of armed actors in these cycles. Armed conflict is not "an external condition that befalls a passive system"; armed actors learn, respond, and strategize to humanitarian interventions. As such, the theory needs to take account of a more refined strategizing among humanitarians and belligerents alike.

Third, the research questions the humanitarian sector's basic distinction between humanitarian aid and development aid (Salomons, 2015). In protracted crises such as South Sudan, this binary makes no sense. I suggest adding humanitarian maintenance as a third term, which is conflict-sensitive, long-term, flexible funding that does not seek to address the crisis (which is politically not possible without peace) but to prevent decay and build towards a political solution.

Fourth, the research reveals a racialised hierarchy of risk in humanitarian

operations which has been overlooked. National staff are disproportionately at risk, and know the most about the situation, but do not have voice and agency. This represents not a moral problem but an operational problem that affects humanitarian effectiveness and sustainability.

5.2.2 Practical Conclusions

In practical terms, the study finds "business as usual" in South Sudan is not working in practice. By failing to improve and expand service delivery, and failing to improve humanitarian indicators, access is still highly limited and services are insufficient: the crisis 11 years and billions of dollars later is effectively the same as it was in 2005.

This failure is not due to a shortfall of effort, money or know-how. It is a category error: the humanitarian community has diagnosed the crisis as a problem of access to the population, funding, logistics. But it is one of political incentives: militaries have incentives to disrupt humanitarian aid but these have not been removed.

The research therefore concludes that it must undergo a paradigm shift: from technical humanitarianism (the idea that logistics and funding will solve the problem) to political humanitarianism, that the outcome of humanitarian assistance depends largely on political processes; and that humanitarians have to engage with politics, despite the fact that it will cost them their vaunted neutrality, impartiality and independence.

5.2.3 Picking up the Pieces

How does armed conflict affect the delivery of international humanitarian services in South Sudan?

Conflict has a dramatic negative impact on the delivery of humanitarian services through three channels: destruction of international aid assets, secondary displacement of national staff and disintegration of domestic supply chains. The impact is not quantitative but qualitatively transformative of service delivery from care to performance of care.

Does level of conflict intensity affect humanitarian access to populations?

Access relates to conflict intensity in a dynamic, moderated manner across actor types, state bureaucracies and asynchronisms. Conflict intensity typically results in less access, with the worst case not high intensity but competitive control, when NSAG and state actors jostle for control and humanitarian access becomes a resource to be extracted.

How do state and non-state actors play a role in influencing the quality of humanitarian services?

States are a contradictory and divided actor, with different actors facilitating and obstructing to calculate the costs and benefits. Non-state actors range from resentful facilitators (organized NSAGs) to marauding spoilers (splinter militias) to ethnic gatekeepers (community defense groups). It's most critical that actors interact in contested spaces it all falls apart.

5.3 Recommendations

5.3.1 Recommendations for Humanitarian Organizations (UN Agencies, INGOs, National NGOs)

Recommendation 1: From access negotiation to access as political settlement Humanitarian organizations should switch from technical to political economy approaches to access. This means that they need to negotiate humanitarian access as part of peace accords, giving states incentives (credibility and funding) to deliver it, and consider these denials as an "offence" against the peace process. It also means giving up on humanitarian principles keeping their integrity in this setting.

Recommendation 2: Priorities national staff. Humanitarian organizations should immediately divert resources to train, protect, insure, pay fairly and give power to national staff. This means pay parity with expatriate staff; life insurance and medical evacuations paid as expatriate staff; a proportionate voice at all levels; and advancement without expatriate experience.

Recommendation 3: No more "fly-in, fly-out". Nationals should be hired for multiyear assignments and given extensive language and cultural training. Insiders should not be appointed in senior roles for less than two years.

Recommendation 4: Focus on effectiveness, not just outputs Humanitarian organizations should set and report on strong indicators of outcomes, as well as outputs. Organizations should publicly disclose failure where high

outputs have not led to improved outcomes and amend their approach.

5.3.2 Recommendations for Donors and Funders

Recommendation 5: Move from short- to longer term, flexible funding

Donors should extend the standard 12-month funding cycle for protracted crises to multi-year (3-5 year) funding with flexible allocation.

Recommendation 6: Directly fund efforts to build national staff capacity.

Donors should establish funds specifically for national staff training, safety, insurance, and career development. This funding should be directly to the national organizations, rather than indirect through expatriate organizations.

Recommendation 7: Embrace "humanitarian maintenance". Donors need to understand that in situations such as South Sudan, we are not "solving" the crises but aims to stand still. Donors should therefore be flexible in their funding to support programming that provides sustained, conflict-sensitive humanitarian support that keeps people alive.

5.3.3 Recommendations for the Government of South Sudan

Recommendation 8: Fulfil humanitarian agreements. The Government of South Sudan should end all bureaucratic blocking of humanitarian work including arbitrary ID card requirements, "facilitation payments" and visa delays immediately.

Recommendation 9: Embed humanitarian access in peace negotiations.

The government should include humanitarian access as part of any peace negotiations, with consequences for obstructing access.

Recommendation 10: Ensure security of local humanitarian staff. The government should investigate and prosecute incidents of violence towards humanitarian workers, especially national staff who are particularly targeted at present.

5.3.4 Recommendations for the United Nations Security Council

Recommendation 11: Mandate the protection of humanitarian access. The UN Security Council should mandate the protection of humanitarian access in all its resolutions on South Sudan, and authorise the use of force to protect aid supply convoys by peacekeeping forces, if required to do so.

Recommendation 12: Sanction those blocking humanitarian aid The Security Council should set up sanctions (freeze of assets, travel ban) against individuals, both state and non-state, who regularly block humanitarian aid.

5.3.5 Recommendations for Researchers

Recommendation 13: Explore and test "humanitarian maintenance". Researchers should design "humanitarian maintenance" as a different mode for protracted crises, and test its hypotheses and impact.

Recommendation 14: Explore the political economy of humanitarian access. Scholars need to move beyond documentation of the problem and look at the political economy of access: who profits; and what would change behaviour.

Recommendation 15: Give voice to national staff Researchers should look

to speak to and identify the lived experiences and expertise of national staff, using participatory approaches to co-pilot the research design, data collection and analysis.

5.3.6 Final Reflection

This research has explored the impact of armed conflict in the region on international humanitarian services in South Sudan between 2013 and 2025. It has demonstrated that conflict has a range of effects on services, that intensity of conflict impacts access in complex and mediated ways, and that state and non-state actors impact effectiveness through an interactive system. The current humanitarian approach is not working because it is the wrong model for addressing a political problem. The proposed reforms are not simple. They demand that humanitarian organisations reject their own fantasies, donors accept longer time frames, and the international community to become political. Yet the costs of continuing the present approach with its inherent limitations and its ever-growing human consequences, are unacceptable.

As one participant lamented, with eloquent weariness:

“It’s the same thing we’ve been doing for eleven years. The same meetings. The same reports. The same appeals. The same funding cycles. The same deaths. At some

point we have to ask ourselves: are we in the business of helping or having a career? If we want to help, we need to do something more. Something hard. Something that may not work. But doing what we are doing the biggest failure."

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