

Researching livelihoods and
services affected by conflict

Rapid change and standstill

Peacemaking, Covid-19 and
rumours in South Sudan

Working paper 95

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Cover photo: Internally Displaced Persons in Juba, South Sudan. UN Photo: Isaac Billy, 2016

About us



The **Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC)** is a global research programme exploring basic services and social protection in fragile and conflict-affected situations. Funded by UK aid from the UK Government (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, FCDO), with complementary funding from Irish Aid and the European Commission (EC), SLRC was established in 2011 with the aim of strengthening the evidence base and informing policy and practice around livelihoods and services in conflict.

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is the lead organisation. SLRC partners include: Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Feinstein International Center (FIC, Tufts University), Focus1000, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI), Wageningen University (WUR), Nepal Centre for Contemporary Research (NCCR), Busara Center for Behavioral Economics, Nepal Institute for Social and Environmental Research (NISER), Narrate, Social Scientists' Association of Sri Lanka (SSA), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Women and Rural Development Network (WORUDET), Claremont Graduate University (CGU), Institute of Development Policy (IOB, University of Antwerp) and the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS, Erasmus University of Rotterdam).

SLRC's research can be separated into two phases. Our first phase of research (2011–2017) was based on three research questions, developed over the course of an intensive one-year inception phase:

- State legitimacy: experiences, perceptions and expectations of the state and local governance in conflict-affected situations
- State capacity: building effective states that deliver services and social protection in conflict-affected situations
- Livelihood trajectories and economic activity under conflict

Guided by our original research questions on state legitimacy, state capacity, and livelihoods, the second phase of SLRC research (2017–2019) delves into questions that still remain, organised into three themes of research. In addition to these themes, SLRC II also has a programme component exploring power and everyday politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). For more information on our work, visit: www.securelivelihoods.org/what-we-do

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Abbreviations



HFS	High Frequency Survey (South Sudan)
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NDM	National Democratic Movement (Lam Akol)
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OPP	other political parties
PoC	Protection of Civilians sites of the United Nations
R-TGoNU	Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity
SLRC	Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium
SSBC	South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army (renamed to South Sudan People's Defence Forces in 2018)
SPLM/A-IO	Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army – In Opposition
SSOA	South Sudan Opposition Alliance
SSP	South Sudanese Pound
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
WHO	World Health Organization

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1 Introduction

Information and rumours have a powerful effect on people's lives. They shape how people experience their environments and view their position in life, and give meaning to the forces that seem to determine this position. Information is often assumed to be a major driver of decision-making, regardless of whether the information is rumour or verified fact. And yet, how information affects people's lives is often not well examined or established. What is even less explored is how exactly information contributes to the 'mental landscape' – the multiple layers of perceptions, sense-making, decision-making, biases and the sense of self this creates for a person. It is through this 'landscape' that a person travels in their own life (Amanela *et al.*, 2020a).

While there is a lot more attention paid to the exact effects of misinformation and disinformation, attention to how life is experienced within a volatile situation of rumours and information is limited. It is sometimes assumed that rumours and mis- or dis-information¹ are particularly impactful in volatile environments. There is some insight that misinformation in particular spreads more quickly, as Tanner argues, 'during times of intense anxiety and uncertainty' (Tanner, 2020). While information that travels faster can accelerate the spread of misinformation, the effects of this are unclear on subsequent actions or decisions (*ibid.*).

The situation in South Sudan over the past years has been such a time of anxiety and uncertainty, and 2020 has been yet another volatile year. This time, in addition to the ambiguities that the South Sudanese peace process brings, and the threats that failure poses, challenges have been exacerbated through the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. Examining how people perceive the information and events landscape around them, and how this influences how they experience their lives, provides insight into the interplay between information and the daily realities of lives under extreme distress.

This report offers insights into the lives of eight respondents who agreed to share how they were living their lives in 2020 – their struggles and discernments, as well as the kind of information they were hearing, what they thought about it and whether they took any decision because of what they were hearing. A striking pattern occurs across all respondents that points towards the need to question common assumptions about how information drives behaviour. Despite being exposed to

¹ Misinformation is inadvertently spread, whereas disinformation is used strategically (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017).

information, rumours and rapid changes around them, residents of South Sudan's capital Juba experienced these volatile times as a period of personal standstill.

After following eight people over an extended time period, this paper provides a micro-view of why information is less influential on behaviour in cases where options for different types of behaviour are severely limited. The information the respondents received over the course of six months shaped their decisions towards inactivity, born out of lack of options, resignation, or deep exhaustion from having to deal with a never-ceasing threat to their life and livelihood.

Daily life in South Sudan is determined by a brutal and relentless struggle to survive. The sheer survival needs take precedence over being influenced either way by information and events. For South Sudanese, whose everyday survival struggle in terms of their physical security and their ability to have enough food and appropriate shelter has been ongoing for years, 2020 was less of an outlier than the extraordinary circumstances might suggest. Embedded in the simultaneously rapid and slow developments of peace-agreement implementation and the pandemic, is their experience of a disempowering standstill: the acute experience that, despite rapid change all around them, nothing changes for them.

Box 1: Information about respondents

Respondent 1

A male in his forties from a non-dominant group in a heterogeneous area of South Sudan. He barely went to school and has held different positions in the army. He lost a brother and three nieces and nephews in the killings in Juba in 2013. He had wanted to go to a refugee camp in Uganda but could not afford it.

Respondent 2

A male in his late forties. He is from the Nuer people and from a dominantly Nuer part of the country. He finished secondary school and his only goal in life is to continue his university education.

Respondent 3

A male in his very late forties from Northern Bahr El Gazal state, who never attended school.

Respondent 4

A male in his late thirties from Malakal. He has been struggling to find work in Juba since the civil war started in 2013. He thinks about going home, but cannot afford transport.

Respondent 5

A female in her late thirties. She is married to a man from a different people who is a soldier, but she has not heard from him for a while. She used to support her two children with her fruit-selling business. Her business is no longer viable, as she cannot afford to buy fruit anymore. She depends on relatives for accommodation for herself and the children.

Respondent 6

A male in his thirties who normally works as a driver, but now his employment situation is unstable. He has two wives, but is in dispute with the family of his second wife over bride price. His first wife and the children from that marriage are staying in his hometown.

Respondent 7

A male who wanted no other criteria known about himself.

Respondent 8

A male who did not give his age. He is job hunting.

1.1 Structure of this report

This report first outlines the research methods and the limitations of the chosen approach. It then offers background on events in South Sudan in 2020 (Section 2), with particular emphasis on events that respondents highlighted as important to them. It then situates this research into broader considerations about the impact of information (whether right or wrong) on decision-making and the experience of everyday life (Section 3). It distils patterns of information that respondents highlighted as particularly important. The bulk of the report is the story of how eight people in South Sudan's capital Juba lived their lives in 2020 (Section 4). These are deeply personal biographies of struggle, narrating how eight people were connecting with what was happening in their country over the course of six months between May and October 2020. A brief conclusion (Section 5) draws out implications.

1.2 Research methods

This research was conducted with eight respondents in Juba, who agreed to be interviewed regularly between May and October 2020. All respondents were interviewed at least four times; three were interviewed five times. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way. Each time, the respondents were asked about what they had heard about developments, how things were changing in their own lives and if they had been making any decisions based on what they heard. Detailed interview notes were taken. Each interview lasted several hours. All respondents agreed to being interviewed on the condition of complete anonymity and being presented with as little identifying information as possible. Only one woman agreed to be interviewed repeatedly. There is an overview of the interview findings in Appendix 1 and the

interview schedule is included as Appendix 2. In addition, researchers took note of ongoing events and a developing 'rumour landscape' to compare respondents' perceptions of events with officially recorded versions.

1.3 Limitations and challenges

This research has a number of limitations and challenges, which means that what is presented here is not a comprehensive or generalisable picture. Respondents were chosen because they were willing to participate, were living in Juba, and largely seemed to face fairly typical struggles. They also represent different ethnic groups, even though, for reasons of anonymity, this is not emphasised or even explicitly clarified in the text. Conducting the research was as challenging logistically for the researchers as it was at times for the respondents. While respondents continued to make time for interviews, it was clear that they were not always convinced that this was a good use of their time since, from their point of view, so little had changed. It was also difficult for respondents to trust that the researchers would treat any information shared with anonymity.

Logistically, it was sometimes difficult to organise a safe meeting place with respondents or transport to get there. There were several incidents when a researcher or respondent suspected that they were being surveilled, and thus some interviews were cut short or postponed. At some points, it was clear that there was indeed surveillance. For respondents, the time commitment of meeting for interviews was considerable, and we owe them deep gratitude for giving us their time and for sharing glimpses into their lives. When people are fighting for survival, their time is not just precious – it is often the only resource they have.

2 Background: South Sudan's peace, pandemic and pecuniary challenges in 2020

For South Sudan, 2020 was yet another year of tremendous political, social and economic challenge. This was only increased by where the country found itself in its history when the Covid-19 pandemic hit.

South Sudan's violent history started shortly after its independence from Sudan in July 2011. In late 2013, South Sudan's civil war broke out after a breakdown of volatile political compromise in government. The war was soon fought along ethnic lines, including through ethnically targeted massacres. Almost from the beginning, attempts at ceasefires and peace agreements were pursued; both regularly broke down in ever-renewing cycles of violence.

Government at the national, state and local level was in a state of flux following the January 2020 Rome Declaration (GRSS and SSOMA, 2020), in which various conflict parties, including the government and main opposition actors, reaffirmed their commitment to an older Cessation of Hostilities Agreement of December 2017. The latest version of a peace agreement was being implemented, and important and influential government positions slowly filled – usually with much contention on each appointment. For people in all parties to the civil war, many of these appointments brought increased frustration and anxiety as they amounted to an affirmation of centrally held presidential power over all government appointments. In turn, this meant that the power of opposition groups was declining, as part of the peace deal implementation.

Following these agreements, a first action in February 2020 was the dissolving of the Cabinet, as well as state and county positions, in order to make space for a new configuration of appointments. February 2020 marked the appointment of Riek Machar (leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army – In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO)) as First Vice-President and Taban Deng Gai, James Wani Igga and Rebecca Nyandeng de Mabior as Vice-Presidents; Hussein Abdelbagi was later added as the fourth Vice-President representing the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA). On 22 February, the pre-transitional period ended with the swearing in of the new presidency of the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU). A few weeks later, the President appointed the Cabinet, after tough negotiations about allocations of ministries.²

² This resulted in: the government keeping 20 ministries and the SPLM/A-IO 9; SSOA received 3; the SPLM 'Former Detainees' (SPLM-FD) received 2; and the coalition of other political parties (OPP) received 1 (UNSC, 2020a).

In the months leading up to the swearing-in of the R-TGoNU, violence increased again. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that communal violence, cattle raiding and fighting between armed groups had displaced more than 36,000 persons between January and March 2020 (UNSC, 2020a). In April, heavy fighting resumed between the government forces and the National Salvation Front under Thomas Cirillo. A short-term ceasefire was agreed in October 2020 (ICG, 2021).

In the middle of all of this, Covid-19 hit South Sudan slowly – at least to the extent that the arrival of the virus was visible and noted. In fact, the first year of the pandemic, argue Robinson *et al.* (2021), was remarkable due to the invisibility of a global pandemic in South Sudan, with people outside Juba mainly claiming that no virus had reached them. Extremely limited testing capacity, the assumption of under-reporting and infected people displaying no symptoms made it challenging to track the pandemic. On 20 March 2020, the president appointed a High-Level Taskforce on the Covid-19 Pandemic, with Riek Machar at the head. The first Covid-19 case in South Sudan was reported on 5 April; the patient was a United Nations (UN) worker who had returned to South Sudan at the end of February (WHO South Sudan, 2020).

The High-Level Task Force was dissolved less than two months later and reinstated as the Covid-19 Task Force, with Vice-President Hussein Abdelbagi leading. On 20 May, it was confirmed that all members of the previous High-Level Task Force, including Vice-President Riek Machar, Minister of Defence Angelina Teny and Minister of Information and Communication Michael Makuei Lueth, had tested positive for Covid-19 (Mayar, 2020). At the end of May, official numbers of confirmed Covid-19 cases were recorded as 1,317, including 14 cases within the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) Protection of Civilians (PoC) sites in two locations (UNSC, 2020a). All this time, responses to the pandemic were slow and, if they happened, followed international patterns of pandemic responses that made little sense to South Sudanese, as recommendations were so far removed from the reality of their lives (Robinson *et al.*, 2021).

Implementation of the peace agreement and pandemic conditions soon intermingled. The UN reported ‘anti-United Nations sentiment, hate speech and harassment’ and that ‘the Organization was accused of spreading the virus’ due to the first reported case in the country

happening within the UN (UNSC, 2020a). Implementation of the peace agreement was progressing slowly, with particular attention paid to the transitional security arrangements. The National Transitional Committee, tasked with implementing the arrangements, was appointed by the end of March 2020.

A crucial part of the arrangement was that military personnel would be moved from cantonment sites to training centres to undergo a process of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, and they would then be passed out to form the new unified national forces. These training centres halted activities at the end of March and about 35,000 personnel remained in cantonment sites under very challenging conditions (UNSC, 2020a). Reportedly, this created an exodus of people from the sites. Yet, on 6 May, it was agreed that transitional security arrangements would be implemented, so that trainees would be passed out to the unified forces within one month. By the end of 2020, however, no progress had been made towards unifying the forces (UNSC, 2020b).

A second area of delay was how to split the positions of governors among the parties in government. A decision issued by the Office of the President on 7 May was officially rejected by Machar due to a lack of consensus; the National Democratic Movement (NDM) and parts of other political parties (OPP) also objected.³ The matter was escalated to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). In June 2020, eight state governors were named, with the Jonglei governor appointed in July 2020 and the Upper Nile governor controversially selected finally in January 2021. In mid-July 2020, the government and the SPLM/A-IO agreed to the Revitalised Agreement on the allocation of states and announcement of governors. The R-TGoNU still had to install some state governors and establish state and county administrations. At the start of 2021, commissioners were still being installed. The implementation of the agreement was plagued with delays from the start, with specific delays on security arrangements and the establishment of the national legislative assembly, with the UN Security Council (UNSC) urging the parties to commit to swift implementation (UNSC, 2020c).

Meanwhile, Covid-19-related government restrictions curtailed both peacekeeping and humanitarian activities. Within parties to the peace process, namely the opposition parties, fragmentation was becoming obvious

³ The allocation from the Office of the President was that six states would go to the former Transitional Government of National Unity, SPLM/A-IO would get three gubernatorial positions, and one was allocated to the SSOA.

and focused on how positions within the R-TGoNU had been allocated. A number of prominent members of the SPLM/A-IO defected as a result.

South Sudan's citizens, accustomed to watching political wrestling, delays and defections, were hit by an ever-deteriorating economic situation. Falling oil prices and production was the starkest measure of this. In 2011, South Sudan's oil revenue sat at US\$900 million per month, whereas, in 2020, the country made US\$30 million per month from oil (Elias and Biajo, 2020). The pandemic additionally decreased the already limited funds available for the implementation of the Revitalized Agreement. For ordinary citizens, the notion of having to struggle for survival was no longer a figure of speech. They were hit by the impact of currency fluctuation, rising food prices and fewer jobs available because operations were cut back due to the pandemic or reduced aid funding. The UN estimated that 7.5 million people could not cover their basic needs and that half of the population was living with hunger (UNSC, 2020a). In December 2020, the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator revealed that, in five counties, 5%–10% of the population was facing catastrophic levels of food insecurity and famine (UNSC, 2020b).

The South Sudan High Frequency Survey (HFS) tracked real-time prices and testimonies of everyday economic struggle between 2015 and 2017, with the starkest increases visible during that time in market exchange rates and market price indices (World Bank, 2018). The World Bank has described 'near hyperinflationary conditions' that the country has been experiencing since the South Sudanese Pound (SSP) was floated in 2015, leading to a 1,100% rise in the consumer price index between December 2015 and December 2017 (Pape and Finn, 2019).

Throughout 2020, inflation was high (although nowhere near as high as in previous years): between 37% and

54% in the earlier part of the year, dropping to around 10% between June and October, and then to above 70% in November (TE/SSNBS, 2020). Because oil sales collapsed, the Central Bank ran out of foreign exchange reserves in August, which left the Central Bank without a tool to stop the depreciation of the SSP (Rutter, 2020). The rapid change in inflation rates in early November can be attributed to the Cabinet decision, in early October, to change South Sudan's currency. According to the Minister of Information, Michael Makuei Lueth, the government had identified that a problem for South Sudan's economy was that 'most citizens are actually hoarding currency in their houses' (Takpiny, 2020). The government's strategy was to force people to change the currency they were hoarding to bring it back into circulation: 'This advice goes to those who are hoarding money; hurry to the banks and put the money in the banks, so that you can avoid queuing up when the time comes for the exchange of currency' (ibid.). However, the government had to backtrack from that announcement, as it was said to have caused hyperinflation (Rutter, 2020).

Other views of the reasons for South Sudan's economic crises have been abundant: falling oil production and crude oil prices, protracted war and insecurity, mass displacement, ongoing violence and, as Pape and Finn (2019) argue, 'private consumption has been consistently falling since the onset of the civil war'. Thomas (2019) indicates yet other causes rooted in the historical transition South Sudan is experiencing: many South Sudanese continue to struggle even to access cash, and that is one reason why people are finding it difficult to buy food while their livelihood economies are transitioning towards markets – a brutal process that reshapes social orders and aspirations. In this scenario, in which survival is extremely challenging, it was predicted that the economic impact of Covid-19 would affect the urban poor most severely – 'especially single women, disabled people and street children, who often rely on market and restaurant leftovers for food' (Rift Valley Institute, 2020: 3).

3 Rumours, information and the mental landscape

Rumours and information are a crucial aspect of the ‘mental landscape’, a concept born out of research by the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) (Amanela *et al.*, 2020b). The notion of the mental landscape brings together the many layers that shape how an individual experiences their world. These experiences are cumulative layers of sense-making of current conditions, and how these link to individual or collective memories and everyday experiences. The mental landscape also acts as the backdrop to decision-making and behaviour, as people base those on their perceptions, emotions, mental short-cuts and experiences, rather than a usually imaginary state of rational decision-making and weighing of information.

In South Sudan, just like everywhere else, rumours are part of everyday life. The official information landscape is, as can be expected for a country at war with itself, hindered by politics and restrictions. Reporters without Borders ranks South Sudan 138 out of 180 countries on its 2020 World Press Freedom Index⁴. The media landscape is weakened by the experience of harassment and even killings of journalists in previous years (although no journalist has been killed since 2018). And media coverage, particularly on issues linked to the conflict, is curtailed by the government. This is particularly stark in small-scale intimidation aimed at suppressing coverage. Some foreign journalists have been expelled; 2018 saw the shutdown of the United Kingdom’s British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and UN frequencies or stations (although the BBC has been able to broadcast again since late 2020) (Reporters without Borders, 2020).

With Covid-19, interest in how people receive and perceive information has become particularly acute. Increasing attention has been paid to the power of information, misinformation (wrong information that is unknowingly spread) and disinformation (wrong information that is strategically spread). The phenomenon, framed by Wardle and Derakshan (2017) as ‘information disorder’, led to the WHO declaring an ‘infodemic’ alongside the pandemic (WHO, 2020). While there is increasing research on the impact of information and rumours on actions, this tends to be very context-specific – for example by examining how the nature of content influences how much attention people pay, and the role of emotions and morals (Brady *et al.*, 2020). The battle for online attention is less significant in an environment where

⁴ See <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

internet access is patchy or unaffordable and where daily struggle for survival simply means that people have less attention to spare.

Fine and Ellis (2010) have highlighted how uncertainty – particularly political and socioeconomic uncertainty – fuels rumour mills. Rumours represent processes of sense-making and ordering (Kapferer, 1990). Sandor (2020: XX) offers a beautiful image of how powerful rumours can be: ‘Some act like a handful of tar passed around from one individual to another – the information sticks to such a degree that no matter how intense the scrubbing (through debunking efforts, increased education, official denials, etc.), one cannot remove the residue’. Rumours that circulate gain power each time a person hears them again (Greenhill and Oppenheim, 2017). But crucially, argues Sander (2020: 916), rumours are an activator: ‘Rumours, even the seemingly outlandish, are consequential, because they indicate how individuals and communities understand the realm of the possible, their own sense of belonging, and power relations writ large in times of rapid socio-political change and turmoil’.

Among some groups in South Sudan, rumours blur with other kinds of narratives, stories and prophecies that provide sense-making frameworks. Hutchinson and Pendle (2015: 416) argue that two contemporary Nuer prophets ‘have pursued a common endeavor by seeking to provide accessible arenas for people to manage feelings of anxiety and uncertainty fostered by decades of political instability, social division, and wartime violence’. Other studies of conflict have offered similar insights on the need to understand everyday sense-making (Finnstroem, 2008).

Embedding the lives of eight South Sudanese people, during a time of intense rumours, into the scholarship on rumours brings a surprising insight: rumours hardly seem to have an impact on how people act, and information flows are slower than expected, even in a place as central as Juba. Alongside their expressed frustration, respondents said that they had little interest in taking any decisions based on rumours. As Sander (2020) reminds us, rumours clarify to people what is possible and what power might hold over their own situation. All our respondents made very clear that they felt they had no power, they could not act, were barely surviving and all they could do with a rumour was shrug it off or be frustrated about it. This follows also the experience of many South Sudanese that disease is a normal part of life, as is experiencing other traumatic events (Rift Valley

Institute, 2020). A period of consequential developments and ever-changing information was experienced by individuals as simply a reminder of how hard life and the daily struggle for survival had become, and how little they could do about this.

3.1 Patterns of rumours and experiencing the mental landscape

A number of common patterns emerged across the interviews, conducted several times across six months from May to October 2020. Notably, the pandemic played a very minor role in the day-to-day experience of people. There was an acute awareness of the high-level quarrels in the government over ministerial and gubernatorial posts, and widely shared unease about the fact that the unified national forces had not been established. The most prominent pattern, however, was a deep sense of exhaustion, standstill and paralysis: an inability to see any possibility of how the situation could improve for the country and for individuals. One reason for this might also be that the experience of the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic was gradual, and did not follow previous experiences of community responses to disease outbreaks. Such previous responses had involved community-based planning meetings, calling on all to do their part to avoid disease spread, and particularly focused on women as holders of traditional medical knowledge and supporters of community decisions – a pattern that, argue Kindersley *et al.*, (2021: 22) ‘reflects the fact that the people who decide what happens when an infectious disease afflicts a locality are generally those who play a role in treatment pathways’.

There are a number of other cross-cutting patterns in how the eight respondents in Juba experienced the pandemic. Respondents often related their own acute vulnerability – to currency fluctuation or the pandemic, for instance – to their chronic situation. For example, having heard about the pandemic, one respondent had also heard that there was now an effective treatment. This was in May 2020 and thus clearly misinformation, but this was not the crucial element: in the respondent’s view, many South Sudanese could not be saved by the treatment as the World Health Organization (WHO) had announced, in his words, that the effectiveness depended on a person’s immune system and many people had compromised immune systems.

Another striking element of the mental landscape was an expansion of the time horizon of change: as individuals experienced their situation as standstill and

with no prospect of change, the time horizon for such change was expanded far into the future – into the next generation and beyond. The explanations given were deeply rooted in a political-economy analysis, with respondents explaining that the time of a peace-deal implementation was the time when leaders consolidated their access to resources and thus the peace deal made it impossible for change to happen.

The starkest element of outside influence creating disorder and instability was the US dollar. With South Sudan running out of foreign exchange reserves, SSP volatility increased noticeably. In late 2019, US\$1 bought between SSP 320 and SSP 380 on the black market. In July 2020, the black market traded US\$1 for SSP 400. In early September, US\$1 bought SSP 500 on the black market; the official exchange rate put US\$1 at SSP 55 (Elias and Biajo, 2020). In October 2020, the SSP traded

at 510 for US\$1 on the black market, with the official exchange rate at SSP 167 (Takpiny, 2020). As many of the goods traded in South Sudanese markets are imported, consumers feel the impact almost instantly. In May, one basin of groundnuts in the market sold for SSP 12,000. In September, that price had doubled.⁵

These extremely distressing and threatening economic developments contributed to a maybe-unexpected shared experience across most respondents – inaction. A common external perception of volatile contexts is that they catalyse action. However, for those caught in the middle of them, the better option (emotionally, and because there is no clear path of what to do) is to wait. If there are no good options or acceptable levels of risk available, it is less helpful to spend the precious commodity of hope on endeavours likely to bring disappointment (Amanela *et al.*, 2020c).

⁵ Interview with woman selling groundnuts in a Juba market, 25 September 2020.

4 Eight lives over the course of six months: living through turmoil and standstill in 2020

4.1 May 2020

Covid-19

In May 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic was still new, but Respondent 2 had already experienced the impact of the pandemic. Respondent 2 is from the Nuer people and an ethnically homogenous area. He finished his secondary school education and said that:

the coronavirus has paralysed everything economically, politically and socially. Nothing is okay. Life has become difficult to everybody with the lockdown and there are no social services that are provided to the citizen by the government. It is only God who is helping people of South Sudan with the situation. There is no proper medical facilities for the infected people and the number is just going higher. At first it was 6, then jumped to 3,428 cases in single day. What I heard was that there are only 29 beds in the treatment centre. If that is true, then we are in big problem.⁶ (Respondent 2)

Respondent 3 was also extremely concerned about the limited hospital facilities:

I heard that there are 20 beds and four ventilators in the isolation centre and only for VIPs. And the rest of people who are infected with the virus are told to stay in their homes which is very dangerous to the rest of the population. (Respondent 3)

Respondent 2 was particularly dismayed that there had been no official information on Covid-19, apart from some case numbers:

Not like other countries like Uganda and Kenya, where the President gives update on the coronavirus. Every evening throughout since the coronavirus outbreak up to now, their citizens are updated with how their country is combating the virus, which is not the case with South Sudan. (Respondent 2)

Respondent 3, who is a man in his late forties from northern Bhar el Ghazal state, who has never attended school, saw a relationship between the delays in the peace process and the pandemic. He explained the Covid-19-related delays, not because of restrictions, but 'because of the money... which has been donated to help

⁶ The news had been that South Sudan had only 24 beds in intensive care units (see, for example, Humanity & Inclusion, 2020).

the fight of the virus'. Respondent 8 expected support from western powers to dwindle as countries became more inward-looking to deal with the pandemic.

Peace process and governance

Respondent 1 is from a non-dominant group in a heterogenous area of South Sudan. He is in his forties and does not have much schooling. He has worked in different positions in the army. In 2013, he lost a brother in Juba when SPLA soldiers came to kill a Nuer family in the house where he was staying. Three children – the respondent's nieces and nephews – were also killed that morning; only the respondent's sister-in-law survived. In May 2020, he spoke of 2013 as the year:

that no one will ever forget in the history of South Sudan... Killing of people, raping of women and girls, raping of men along Yei road, and looting of civilian properties by the government soldiers. And not only that: people running to camps and PoCs in UNMISS. And many more to mention that cannot make someone likely to forget the year 2013.

(Respondent 1)

Respondent 2 was also in Juba in 2013 and was told to pick up a gun by someone from his people to kill Nuer. He did not want to do it. When interviewed in May 2020, Respondent 2 talked about his memories of being called to a meeting with Nuer leadership in mid-December 2013 to be told about the massacres of Nuer in Juba, and being told 'There is no single Nuer left'. He then watched the youth around him mobilise into the White Army, planning to march on Juba. He chose not to participate in the mobilisation and instead found shelter in a PoC, where he stayed for two years. He then moved to Juba in 2015 during the peace talks in Ethiopia, which he found promising. Staying with his uncle in Juba he 'found that what was said to us – that all Nuer in Juba were dead – is not true. It was a way of getting manpower to go and fight for Riek [Machar] and Taban [Deng].'

Respondent 3 has equally horrifying memories of 2016. The violence and ensuing peace negotiations have left him disillusioned about what might be possible for South Sudan:

Have you seen anything good of the deals from 2015–18 and up to now? ... What I know is that this peace deal was not signed to end the suffering of poor citizens of this nation. It was signed for personal interest of the politicians. It is to make them rich

again because what they had in the past has got finished. (Respondent 3)

Respondent 1 was hopeful when Machar returned to Juba in April 2016, 'only to witness another mass killing of people again in July the same year'. This was also the time when he heard more about mass mobilisations of young Dinka tribesmen into the army. He heard that the aim of this was to kill non-Dinka people. At first, he did not believe such rumours, but then started to notice with his own eyes more mobilisation in Juba and Yei. He also heard similar stories from other places. This continued until September 2018 when he heard for the first time that peace talks were taking place in Sudan, Ethiopia and Uganda. He heard that Machar would come to Juba again to form a government in May 2019, 'which didn't work that time'.

Respondent 8 observed the politics with interest, especially the debates over whether Jonglei should be government- or SPLM/A-IO-administered.

Although Respondent 2 was sure that it is true that there is a tribal war in South Sudan and that the Dinka people had declared their intention to kill all non-Dinka people, the respondent knew that this was never 'said on public news or media'.

The information Respondent 1 uses comes from a number of sources, primarily Eye Radio, South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation (SSBC) Arabic news, and what he hears in the market. His most important way of verifying news is to see for himself: 'Unless I see changes, I will not believe that things will change soon.' He gives as an example the rumour that there is supposed to be an election in South Sudan in three years. Respondent 8 also said that the timeline for elections clearly needed to be changed by IGAD, as the original 36 months was no longer feasible. Respondent 1 reiterated that:

no public figure has come live on TV to tell people about it, only on social media. I don't trust anyone from the government, even the media house in giving information, reason being that all the media houses are controlled by security agencies of the government. (Respondent 1)

Respondents 2 and 3 echoed this sentiment, that they trust nobody to provide accurate information because of government pressure on local media and curtailing of international media. All talked about the government revoking the frequency for BBC broadcasts, which to them

means that they lost ‘the only media house who used to give correct information’ (Respondent 1).

Respondent 2 was aware that it had been two months since the government had been formed at the national level, but not at the state level. He attributed the delay to central government wanting to make sure it would be able to administer expected Covid-19 funding: ‘They have taken the chance of the pandemic to overlook the implementation of the peace, which is a big mistake.’

Livelihood and survival

Respondent 8 was preoccupied with searching for a job. He had applied in numerous places but never even reached interview stage.

Changes and standstill

Despite the many developments in the past four years, Respondent 1 felt that the situation had really not changed at all ‘because things are the same in terms of security. Daily life and cost of living remains the same.’ He thought that it was too late for his generation to experience change but said that once ‘these current leaders are no longer in the government, that is when our children will begin to think of change’.

Respondent 1 said that he started feeling helpless in 2013:

There was nothing for me to do. What can I do about it? I did not think of going anywhere, because all roads were blocked and a lot of killings were taking place all over the country. I thought of going to the [refugee camp in Uganda] but that didn't work. Because it requires money for going to the border.
(Respondent 1)

He felt aggrieved that what he was experiencing ‘is not the type of life we hoped to live when we voted for our independence’. He felt unable to do anything to influence his situation: ‘What is happening is above one’s power to act. It is a political issue and has to be handled politically.’ He recognised that he was too tired to prepare in case the situation deteriorated and that this might be a mistake: ‘Maybe one has to prepare for what will happen if this peace is not implemented well. Prepare to go to the camps.’ But, he said, others might be more organised than him and were preparing to escape, but were not

talking about it since there is so little trust between people. Most of all, nobody wants to be seen to distrust the government.

Respondent 2 experienced the time between 2016 and 2020 as especially eventful, particularly with regard to actions of government forces:

things like raping of the female international aid workers and local women, looting of properties and taking over people's house. Even up to now, government soldiers are still occupying some properties like churches and schools.⁷ (Respondent 2)

Respondent 2 was doubtful about the extent to which any peace agreement was being implemented with good will. He did not personally feel the need to make plans for his life or prepare for contingencies, since all that he wants is for peace to come ‘so that I can go back to continue with my university studies. That was all that I wanted.’

4.2 June 2020

Covid-19

In early June 2020, Respondent 1 had heard two things on the radio about Coronavirus: that it was now in Juba and that the WHO had said that there was an effective treatment, but that the effectiveness depended on a person’s immune system. He had also heard from his army contacts that Covid had killed many army generals in the month of May.

Peace process and governance

Respondent 4 had little faith in the peace agreement and was expecting war to break out again within 36 months because he had heard that individual senior government officials were training their own armies (following a past pattern). But he felt powerless to do anything.

What we want is peace so that people can do their own things... Though things will change, it will take time to put things right... If they, the leaders are not accountable for what they are doing now, things will not change. The question remains who will ask who for accountability, since they are all the same from top to bottom. (Respondent 4)

⁷ See Associated Press (2016).

Respondent 2 had become even more disillusioned with the leadership of the country, which, he had come to discover, 'was fighting for his own interest and the interest of his family, which is so unfair to do that'. He was particularly aggrieved that leadership seemed to be uninterested in moving towards peace to allow people to move on, 'but instead they are making them think more about their lost loved ones'. He wanted peace to give people back some power over their lives:

Politically, Respondent 1 had heard that the peace negotiations were in a deadlock over 'the share of the states'. Respondent 7 (interviewed for the first time in June, and wanting no other criteria known about himself except that he is male) shared a bleak outlook on the peace process and had resigned himself to the fact that 'there will be no change in this country as people expect... This country is in a total mess. People in Juba are talking of peace; others are busy fighting and killing each other.' The only change he was hoping for, he said, could come from God. He was, however, quite positive about the progress on state governor appointments, even with only eight out of ten appointed. Respondent 6, on the other hand, dismissed this as insubstantial progress.

Respondent 1's proposed solution to the deadlock was for IGAD to make the decision, but he suspected they would not because the peace talks were a profitable business. He had heard more rumours that, in the next fortnight, '[President] Salva and [Vice-President] Riek are going for talks in Egypt and the main agenda of the meeting is about the deadlock'. He thought that this was a lie and that the real reason for their trip to Egypt must be because of business interests: 'If it is not business, why are they going for the talks in another country? While they are all here in Juba, why don't they meet here and come up with solutions to their problems?' He was also concerned that the peace process was lacking clarity on security arrangements and explained that the government had restructured the army leadership without assigning anyone from the SPLM/A-IO. He had heard the rumour that the President had threatened to remove the Minister of Defence – a statement that he read as a clear signal that the President was not implementing the peace agreement in good faith. He was not thinking about making any decision or preparation: 'I am just waiting to see what will happen. The rest I leave all to God who has all what he can do to me, not myself.'

Despite the peace deal, Respondent 1 said, people were still being killed along the main roads in Juba and were still fighting in the states. Respondent 3, however, had

a sense that security in Juba had somewhat improved ('There are no more gun shots at night like there used to be'), but the rest of the country was still suffering insecurity which he used as proof that South Sudan was not yet ready for peace.

Respondent 4 identified one reason why South Sudan was not getting ready for peace: He was particularly aggrieved with the role China had played in South Sudan and its conflict, and felt that Chinese loans and Chinese-built infrastructure had not brought much benefit to ordinary South Sudanese. The reason why most South Sudanese could not see that, he said, was because they had been excluded from education and thus believed everything politicians told them. He was talking of soldiers who had believed the promises they had been given, but who had not been paid for months – leading to three suicides among soldiers in Torit 'because they have seen that there is no future; it is better for them to kill themselves'. He also pointed fingers at Uganda, which he said had done nothing to investigate why South Sudanese politicians were able to rent big houses in Kampala and instead kept sending in the Ugandan army to support the SPLA (Rolandsen *et al.*, 2015). By far his most reliable information on these things, Respondent 4 said, came from people he knew who had connections.

Livelihood and survival

Respondent 6 (a man in his thirties who works as a driver and is married to two wives) gave his first interview in June. During this time, his main interest in the peace process was waiting for the appointment of the governors. Whether or not this was going to happen was a crucial question for him, as he was making his own livelihood decisions dependent on it. He had given himself an October deadline to see if signs of peace were credible. If they were not, he said, he would:

send my family to refugee camps in Uganda. Because my contract will be expiring in December, it is better for me to send them there in the camp. If I keep them with me, it will be expensive for me to feed them. Sometimes I may not manage. (Respondent 6)

Respondent 5, a woman in her late thirties, was also first interviewed in June. She has two children and is married to a man from a different people than herself. Her living conditions were very challenging, and she was not able to afford enough food for her children and herself. This was because her fruit-selling business was not going well. The money she was able to make in a day, about SSP 3,000,

was not enough to pay for that day's food. She no longer had the option of going back to the village, where there once was enough food from the farms. The farms had been destroyed: 'If I go there now... you will not get anything like cassava. All destroyed by the government forces.' She was thinking of asking her relatives to take care of her children, but could not reach them. She watched food prices with great anxiety and saw them rise every day:

From 2010 up to 2014, a kilo of meat was at SSP 8. It is only from 2015, that is when things start going high. When ask why, they will tell 'dollar'. Now a kilo of meat is at SSP 1,800. Not only meat but everything in market is high. (Respondent 5)

Respondent 4 is a man from Malakal. Since the war started in South Sudan in 2013, he had been struggling to find work and had been torn between trying to be safe in Juba (where he is living with his wife) and going back home, which he has never managed to do as he has been unable to get transport back. Interviewed in June for the first time, he said that he was surviving because he was being helped by friends, although he was unsure how his friends were able to do that, suspecting that they had family members who either worked in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or had links to top government positions.

He was particularly concerned about recent information from the finance ministry that people keeping money at home was contributing to South Sudan's precarious economic situation:

South Sudan is the only country in the world where you can't plan for tomorrow, because anything can happen at any time. And it is why many people are not putting their money in the banks. Everyone keeps his/her money at home, and that is why every month you see new notes in the market. Government prints more notes because there is no circulation of money.⁸ (Respondent 4)

Changes and standstill

Respondent 1's life had changed little in the one month that had passed since his first interview, despite turmoil all around him:

My life has not changed since we last met. How can life change when there is no change in the

country? Every day, prices of commodities in the markets are going high and higher. There are no jobs and the government is not doing anything to control the market in order to protect the citizens. (Respondent 1)

He had started making charcoal to sell as a way to survive, but this had become a precarious undertaking: 'These days, it is not safe to do that because you may be killed [when out in the bush] by the so-called "unknown gunmen" which is the order of the day in this country.'

Respondent 2 also said that, for him, life had not changed: 'I don't know whether my life will ever change.' Day-to-day survival was becoming more difficult. He was dependent on his uncle, who had moved into the PoC, for food items 'and that is what I survive on. Sometimes I go out and do some casual work and am paid for that.' He was able to live in his brother's house, but this was also painful because his brother – who had been in the army – was killed by soldiers in December 2013.

While Respondent 5 tried to maintain hope, she was not sure when things might get better and there were worrying signs that they would not:

I learnt that there was going to be an election after the three years (which has already gone). And there is no sign of peace coming to the people but more suffering. It was aired on radio that the interim period is 36 months. That was from 2018, now we are in 2020. So how many months have gone and how many are left? By this time, a lot would have happened. (Respondent 5)

Respondent 6 was wondering whether Covid-19 might prevent him from implementing his plan B, 'which is take my family to my home village'. This plan B arose from the respondent's view of South Sudan's problems as so entrenched that they would take years to untangle:

The problem of South Sudan is not something that will end today and tomorrow... As we are here, busy killing ourselves, our neighbouring countries are busy encroaching our borders. Recently, we were at the border with Kenya and the Kenyan soldiers are 13 kilometres deep into South Sudan with their border post. Uganda on the other side is encroaching on the side of Eastern Equatoria. (Respondent 6)

⁸ This was the reason for the announced change of currency given by the government a few months later; the government had to retract from the plan.

Respondent 3 specified a timeline for when he thought South Sudan might be ready for change and peace: 'It will take years and years for people of South Sudan to realise that there is no need for killing each other. Let us talk of 50 to 60 years.' Alongside his impression that Juba had improved was his overarching experience that there was 'no change at all levels of levels'. He was aggrieved that he saw politicians he considered as responsible for the war staying in expensive hotels while civil servants had not been paid a salary 'for more than seven months'. Because little was changing in the peace implementation, he had lost trust in international bodies, in some ways following the long tradition of South Sudan's marginalisation from international powers (Thomas, 2015).

4.3 August 2020

Covid-19

In August, Respondent 2 was glad to still be healthy, having observed more illness around him. Respondent 5 had heard about Covid-19 'from people and radios', but had not seen any government action – and even less so more recently:

At first, they used to update people about the pandemic on TV and radios. That was when we were getting the actual number of people infected, recoveries and death. But now I don't know what is the actual numbers of people infected, recoveries and deaths. (Respondent 2)

Respondent 1 had not heard much at all about Covid-19 anymore, assuming that it might mean that the pandemic was now over. The pandemic also had not featured much in Respondent 4's life due to the much bigger concerns about finding enough to eat:

I don't care about Coronavirus and that is why I wake up in the morning thinking of what I will eat. I don't say that there is no Corona. It is there. Do I have stay to die at home because of it? No, it is better to die of Corona than dying of hunger. (Respondent 4)

He also felt that politicians were using the pandemic as an excuse for the delays in the peace talks: 'All sort of all things are pushed on Corona.' Echoing this sentiment was Respondent 7, who had heard senior SPLM leadership on Radio FM blame Covid for the economic collapse, which

he felt was making excuses: 'Why are they not accepting the fact that they have gone wrong in managing the affairs of the country?'

Peace process

Respondent 7 felt that peace implementation had been only talk, with the Government of Unity 'leaving out the major part of the implementation which is the dissolving of the national legislative assembly and unification of national army'. The timeline for the implementation of the peace process, Respondent 4 said, had been disappointing: 'When did they sign the peace; and how far have they gone with implementation process? One year is gone out of the three years. So let us wait for the worst to come.'

Respondent 2 echoed the lack of progress in the implementation of the peace deal, particularly in terms of security arrangements. He acknowledged that governors had been appointed for all states except Upper Nile, but state governments were not functioning. He was waiting to see if the National Transitional Legislative Assembly was going to be dissolved as expected. He was worried about one particular rumour he had heard – that uneducated generals would be retired from the army ranks.⁹ He called this:

the worst-case scenario in the history of South Sudan. If you see almost 90% of the army generals are uneducated and you are talking of retiring them, what do you expect they will do in return as they no longer get the ghost money? (Respondent 2)

He was worried that generals would use their military power to make sure that they would not lose out.

Respondent 1 listed all the things that still needed to happen to make the peace process credible for him:

Security needs to improve. People are still being killed. A lot has been happening in terms of changes in the government, the Government of National Unity has been formed and state governors have been appointed. But other key things in the agreement are not yet done which is a big problem. Security arrangements remain a big problem. Up to now we still have a divided army in the country under their different commands. Governors are appointed, but state governments are not formed up to now. (Respondent 1)

⁹ The retiring of generals was part of demilitarisation after 2013, but the exact propositions are currently unclear. See, for example, AFP (2013).

Respondent 5 saw no improvement in the security situation:

You can still hear people being killed every day, and there are still government soldiers occupying people's houses and homes. Still people are killed in the areas where these soldiers live. They can't do anything to arrest those who are killing people. There is nothing called 'unknown gunmen'. The soldiers are the ones doing all this to civilians. Because they have stayed for months without getting their salaries, they use their guns to get what they want through looting and killing of civilians. (Respondent 5)

Respondent 6 saw no chance of improvement as there was still fighting in many parts of the country: 'Which government is implementing the peace and which government is still fighting?' He expected things to get worse because so many milestones of the peace deal had not been reached:

The parties to the peace deal are complaining of things that are supposed to have happened, but up to now are not happening. Things like dissolving of national parliament, security arrangements and many others. I don't know why it is not happening I think it is the government who is delaying all these because it is up to the government to give out budget for the peace process, and they are not giving money. The little that they gave out went to private pockets of the head of the sub-committees... It is going to take long. (Respondent 6)

Respondent 3 also saw no change towards peace and was not reassured by some movement in the formation of the government. For him, it had simply taken too long: 'There are no reforms in all sectors of the government systems, so it will take time for us to see positive changes. But what I am projecting is that we will only come to see negative changes.' He had also heard that the President wanted to leave the country for medical treatment, but was unwilling to put anyone else in charge. Respondent 1 had also heard the regularly occurring rumour that the President was sick and in need of six months' treatment, but could not leave the country for fear of creating a power vacuum.

Trust in any of the leaders – whom Respondent 3 called 'GoSS, the Government of Self Service' – was extremely

low among most respondents, reinforced by the lack of visibility of any measures against Coronavirus and the lack of government updates on the pandemic. This followed a general pattern, said Respondent 3, that there was little information on the radio or TV that was anything but official decrees, so he was getting all his information 'from people on the streets'.

Respondent 1 was concerned about what he felt was a new absence of the international community:

The international community have turned their back to us because of our doings. They are just looking at us and watching us dying... The US has issued a warning to its citizens not to travel to South Sudan and those in the country should travel in armed cars and take care of Corona, because South Sudan doesn't follow the health rules laid by WHO. So, you can see the level we have reached. (Respondent 1)

Livelihood and survival

Respondent 6 was worried about the news that the government had declared the Central Bank out of hard currency, 'which means all activities concerning peace implementation will come to standstill, and that is what is going to bring problems or fighting again'.¹⁰ Respondent 8 also had heard about the hard currency shortage, and that all Covid emergency money had disappeared. Respondent 3 was struggling to make ends meet because food prices in the market had risen substantially:

You can't tell why is that happening. If you ask the traders, they will tell you the price of dollars has gone high and it is not even there in the Central Bank and not there in the market. If you get dollars, you will get them at SSP 40,000 per US\$100. (Respondent 3)

In the past, he had sometimes been able to get some casual work in construction but, due to the price rises, nobody was constructing any more.

Respondent 7 had just returned from his home area where he had gone to farm peanuts because 'things have changed badly with our work', meaning he could no longer pursue the livelihood he once had. He was expecting more fighting in Juba, and so had left his family in the village. He said he had been struggling to survive, also because of the currency fluctuations.

¹⁰ See Dumo (2020).

Respondent 1 had become used to watching things deteriorating:

Things have not changed. In the market, prices are still going up. I heard the dollar is now at SSP 365. Sometimes I don't know how I get to eat with my family. If we happen to get food today, I will begin to think of tomorrow. Where will I get food for tomorrow? But tomorrow, I find myself getting food. It is through God's mercy that people survive in South Sudan. There is no work for me to do. I have been looking for what to do so that it helps me but I don't get any work. People get jobs through their relatives and tribe, which is a common thing with people of South Sudan. Even if you have a degree, you will not be employed if you don't know anyone in the organisation or in the government.
(Respondent 1)

Respondent 5 was difficult to locate for her second interview. She was no longer at her old home, and it took two days to find her. Her situation had deteriorated even more. She had lost her small business of selling fruit by the road because she was not able to make enough money to afford buying the fruit herself 'because of the prices in the market, the small money I had can't bring me more fruits to resell'. She had also lost her home 'because I cannot manage to pay rent any more. Now I am staying with my uncle's wife. They have only two rooms. I am with her and the children are in one room.' It distressed her immensely that she could not contribute to the household costs:

We are feeding from my uncle's wife, which is sometimes not good for me with kids and I don't contribute something. It pains. It is because I don't have and, sometimes, I don't eat. I will just leave the kids to eat and say that I am not feeling well.
(Respondent 5)

She had been trying to find any kind of work, but had not been successful. The stress and worry of her situation was overwhelming for her: 'I don't sleep at night just thinking of what to do with the kids.'

The economic uncertainty and volatility of the South Sudanese pound was also impossible for Respondent 5 to manage:

I heard that US\$100 is now at SSP 41,000. That is why prices have gone high in the market, so if you are going to the market you have to go with at least

10,000 pounds and above to buy food for a day. People like us can't get that amount for a day. If it continues like that for the next three months, where will we be? (Respondent 5)

She felt abandoned by a government that was not doing anything to stop this volatility:

I have not heard of any government official talking about what is going on in the market. I think because for them they have their money and can pay anything they want from the market. For them money is not a problem at all. They are not thinking of their poor citizens. If you eat or not, it is not their problem.
(Respondent 5)

Respondent 5 still did not know where her husband (a soldier in the SPLA) was, and she had not heard from him in two months. She thought he could be in Uganda, so she went to the army headquarters to ask about him, but 'they are not telling me what went wrong with him'. But even if he returned now, she was not sure if that would make things easier because where would they live?

The only reason why respondent 5 could stay in her uncle's house was because her uncle had been absent. He had travelled to Uganda to visit his children and got stuck when the border was closed due to Covid-19. When her uncle returns, Respondent 5 would no longer be able to stay in his house, as there would not be enough space. Her hope was pinned on the peace process:

I don't know what will happen that time, but let us wait and see how thing go with the peace process. Maybe by then things will get better. If things get better, I will take the kids and go back to the village. I think in the village it will be better for me because I will be able to dig for my kids. (Respondent 5)

She now no longer believed that peace would come and things would improve: 'I don't think there will be peace and things come back like those years back from 2006 to 2012 where SSP 20 could feed the house for three days.'

To make ends meet, Respondent 6 was trying to find a tenant (he had recently lost his job because his employer was downsizing drivers due to a funding shortage). He was also job-hunting, but was unsure that he had enough connections to get a job. He was prepared to go back to his home town to farm, if he was unable to find a job.

The currency exchange rate was a huge concern for Respondent 6, both economically and because he feared unrest:

The rate of one dollar is now at SSP 41 or 42, which is so bad for the people of South Sudan, and for sure by the end of next month it will reach 50 or plus. And that is when people will know that the only thing is to go on the streets of Juba... Because if people just keep on watching the government sleeping, it will reach a point in life where people will begin dying inside their houses. (Respondent 6)

Respondent 6 also said that if people protest, there will be killings. But he saw the suffering around him every day:

There are people who have gone for some days without tasting a meal. And most men have left their houses because there is nothing that they can provide to their families. I have a friend (I will not name him), who has been out of the house for three days and the wife doesn't know where he is now. I know it is not a solution, but to him it is. (Respondent 6)

Changes and standstill

Respondent 1 said he was doing well, despite lack of progress in the peace process: 'Nothing has changed in my life. Things are hard, but there is nothing for me to do. Just pushing like usual. For things to change, a lot needs to be done with the peace process.' Respondent 1 had thought about going to a refugee camp for a while, but had now abandoned the idea because he felt even that also would change nothing for him. Respondent 3 was contemplating going back to the village where at least he would be able to feed himself, but his village was afflicted by communal fighting.

Respondent 2's situation had not changed much, although recently he had been able to get paid work. Despite being grateful for this, he felt that it made no great difference to the overall situation. However, he had recently been in touch with his sister who was in a refugee camp in Uganda. She had lost her son in a camp to illness and was struggling to make ends meet on meagre food rations. He was now hoping to save a little money from his new job, which he wanted to use to facilitate a return from the Ugandan camp for his sister:

It is better for her to come here so that we can be together, instead of her living that miserable life in someone else's country. Then I had nothing to look

after them with, but since God has helped me with this small job, though with little pay, it is okay. I will look after her. (Respondent 2)

Respondent 6 had run into tension with his wife's family. His second wife was 'taken away from me by her relatives with the children, and the other wife has gone to [my home town], so things have changed badly for me'. He explained that relatives had come to take the second wife back because he had not paid the bride price, 'that is why they decided to take her with all the children. By then they demanded SSP 3 million, which is like US\$8,000 now.' He was aggrieved about having lost his children and was planning to take his wife to court over the children. He did not want her back 'because she decided to listen to her people. It is there in the constitution: if you don't want a woman, you have right to ask for your children and that is what I am going to do.'

Because of the precarious economic situation, Respondent 6 had decided to send his first wife to his home town, along with the children of his sister:

... because I cannot manage to feed them here in Juba. It is better for me to be alone here in Juba. [At home] I have relatives and a house there too, so it will not be as expensive as here in Juba. There a lot of food items that are collected from the garden, but in Juba anything requires money. (Respondent 6)

Respondent 8 was reluctant to give another interview, because he said he had nothing new to say: nothing was changing in his situation. He was still job-hunting:

I have been dropping my papers and knocking at every NGO's door, but nothing new. I think most NGOs are closing up most projects because of the situation of the peace deal, which is not happening. (Respondent 8)

He felt that his situation was particularly bad because he was from the Dinka people and people did not understand that he was struggling:

People... will think, 'He is a Dinka. Why is he saying his situation is bad?' It is not that if you are a Dinka, you have everything. It is only those who are close to the first family or from the same clan with the first family. (Respondent 8)

He was relying on friends to help him and his family survive. He said that he wanted to give another interview only if there was any change at all.

4.4 September 2020

Covid-19

Respondent 5 still heard people talking about Coronavirus, but no longer believed that there was much to the virus:

I don't think there is something like that. If truly it is there (as people are talking about it), by this time we would have all died because of Corona. They said people should not be in crowds. People should wear face masks, and people should not shake hands. All this is not happening. You find people doing what they say should not be done to avoid the spread of the virus. That is when I come to say that there is no coronavirus. (Respondent 5)

Covid-19 was no longer a topic that Respondent 1 was even hearing much about and he also pointed out that people were not sticking to suggested measures:

I don't think Corona is still existing. It may be there, but no one cares about its danger. You can see people moving without face masks and there is no social distance. People have gone back to churches as usual. It has not been declared publicly that the pandemic is over. The funny thing about Corona is that there is no clear information about now in South Sudan, like when it started in March; the government is not giving updates on the pandemic on TV or radio. (Respondent 1)

Respondent 3 saw a big change in the course the pandemic had been taking:

You are still asking about Coronavirus? I don't think the pandemic exists any more in this country. There is no more information about the spread, the number of infected and the number of death cases. (Respondent 3)

All information he had about Covid had come from people on the street. But he said that every time he got some information from the street, 'two days later it will be on the radio and the information is the same like what you heard from people'.

While he himself knew that Covid was real (because he was listening to international news and checked social

media), it was no surprise to Respondent 4 that people did not care any more about Covid-19: they were simply struggling to survive and find enough food. He even felt that the government was making up stories about the pandemic to get donations from other countries.

Peace process and governance

Respondent 6 was observing that the peace process was delayed and felt that Covid had been used as an excuse. He said that 'both government and the oppositions are delaying tactics without thinking of the common people who are suffering from their doings'. He was dreaming of having a truly national army that could help the people stage a coup. A coup was necessary, he said, particularly because of the government's inaction in controlling food prices in the market. He was aggrieved that traders were left unregulated and were putting up prices at will. He saw the effect of this: 'The streets are full with homeless and street boys because of the condition they are in... the only thing is to go on the streets and look for leftovers from the restaurants.' He also said that night robberies had come back because the army had not been paid salaries for months. But people were scared to talk about these things 'because if you are found talking about the government, you will be taken to the blue house; and your coming out of there is another question'.

Respondent 1 had heard that the President had appointed a committee to investigate embezzlement of public funds:

The committee has come up with its finding showing that there are directorates not submitting money into the government account. They said that the Directorate of Nationalities, Passports and Immigration has not submitted US\$3.1 million... All this money is going to the pockets of individuals who are the directors of these directorates.¹¹ (Respondent 1)

He had little hope that the committee would be able to bring people to justice: 'They are not the first people to have done that. There are many who have done that and are not accounted for.' More broadly, he was convinced that this was a stalling tactic by the President to slow down peace implementation as this period of semi-implementation was the best time for people to 'fill their pockets'. The implementation of the peace deal was also

¹¹ See Woja (2020).

under-reported, he said, and his only source of information was 'people who are close to the big men there'.

Respondent 3 was looking back at the implementation of the peace deal:

It has taken now two years since it was signed. What has been achieved out of it?... It is now two months going to three since the governors were appointed; up to now they have not formed state governments. How can a governor be the only person in the state? What are they trying to do? What I know is that they just want to frustrate the peace so that it is not fully implemented. From there, the IO will get frustrated and say that we are not part of the deal. The country is finished. There is nothing that people of South Sudan can do to improve the current situation.
(Respondent 3)

He had heard one rumour that concerned him – the suggestion that the unified army would be passed out:

It is not yet broadcast on the radio nor TV, but it will happen soon. The big concern is that these soldiers are not trained together with IO and government; each force is trained differently. How will they work together? (Respondent 3)

In Juba town, Respondent 2 said people still lived in fear: everyday uncertainty of food security was coupled with 'unknown gunmen doing their work' and muggings being common:

Toronto boys are still grabbing people's bags from their hands in front of security forces. The Police and the CID police are seeing all these things happening and they can't arrest anyone. Toronto is a name given to the pick-pocketers and bag-grabbers in the town; they are all armed with pistols. (Respondent 2)

The reason why this was happening, he said, was because the thefts were actually coordinated between security organisations and the Toronto boys: 'It is an organised crime.'

He had witnessed a woman being robbed in the market of SSP 12,000 by two Toronto boys on a motorbike: 'It was not good seeing her crying like a child in front of thousands of people.' The people who had observed the incident did a whip-round to replace the money that had been stolen. He was aghast at the incident and other violent behaviour he had seen, particularly from government soldiers.

He had recently heard a speech by the President, who talked of South Sudan as 'one people and one nation... He said it wrongly because this is not what is there in his mind. He says something and does something different to what he is saying.' When he thought of South Sudan as one people, one nation, he thought it would take 'some good years – I am not meaning two or three years from now – I am talking of 50 years from now'.

Respondent 4 was waiting for new leadership, but could not see how this might come about. He had heard rumours that more fighting in Juba was imminent. The possibility of fighting returning to Juba was also worrying Respondent 5 because of the way she saw things developing:

2013 when the population was increasing, it did not take long until there was a fight; 2016, people think there was going to be peace because Dr Riek came back. Then people started coming back and the population was increasing; it did not take long before the fight broke out in July 2016. Now it is the same-case scenario: you can see people in many numbers. Compared to those years back, that means there is going to be a fight again this time. (Respondent 5)

Respondent 7 was also expecting another war to come soon because he had heard of troop movement in several areas. Yet he felt unable to prepare for it in any way: 'I will not run away and I cannot take my people to go and suffer in another country. We will remain in South Sudan, whatever the case is. There is nothing do.' He no longer trusted talk about the implementation of the peace deal:

You hear them saying in their meetings with diplomats from other western countries, saying 'we are implementing the deal', but actually they are not... People are going through a lot of difficulties in life and the government is not paying attention to them. Instead, the government is making it harder for people to survive in South Sudan. (Respondent 7)

Respondent 8 had heard about some changes – that the Minister of Finance had been replaced – and was curious to see if this would bring any effect (Reuters Staff, 2020a). He had largely given up on the peace process 'because I know there is going be no progress in the implementation of the deal'.

Livelihood and survival

Respondent 5 was still staying with her uncle, who had in the meantime returned from Uganda, so now she shared

the second room in the house with her children. She had not been able to re-establish her fruit-selling business, but had every now and then made a little bit of money doing some housework. But that was not really helping because life in Juba now required having '5,000 and above' to survive for the day: 'Life has become difficult. There is nothing that people can do about it. It's supposed to be for the government to protect people, not people to protect themselves.' She no longer knew who to turn to for help because everyone was in similar conditions or worse, so 'you cannot go and ask for help'. She also reiterated that she could not go back to her parents, as she had married a man of whom they did not approve.

While there had been less fighting in Juba, the ongoing problem with food prices was making life very hard. Respondent 4's modest livelihood of selling stones from a quarry had dried up completely because 'nowadays people are not constructing and there is no market for stones'. He said his family was starving and his child had been ill for two weeks, but he had not been able to get anything from the hospital that was helping. He had not yet turned to his friends for help with his sick child. The continuing inflation and currency fluctuations were making life very hard, with the dollar price rising rapidly.

... there are some families now in Juba who can go for two to three days without eating something. It is because they don't have money to buy food from the market and food in the market is very expensive. Sometimes when I come from where I am knocking stones, I come with SSP 10,000 and give to my wife. Only two days later, she will tell me there is no money for today. I asked myself, 'Where is the money I gave this woman? What is she doing with the money?' Until I had to go to the market, that was when I came to know that things are not easy there. So, if you want to know how people are suffering in Juba, just go to the market. (Respondent 4)

Cultivating or gathering firewood were not possible for Respondent 3, as it was not safe to go into the bush. He felt at a loss:

As for me, I have failed to understand what to do. Sometimes I could think of what to do with this kind of life. I don't get an answer for it. Everything is about the dollar. When you ask why prices are going high, the answer you get is 'dollar'... The government is not doing anything about it. Because for them, they have the dollar and can buy whatever they want from the market... One minister came up publicly

in the National Assembly before the members and said there is nothing that the government can do in order to control the dollar price in the market. Now, if the government is saying they are unable to control the market, what is going to happen to the citizen? (Respondent 3)

Respondent 1 was also extremely worried about money:

I don't sleep at night, not because I am afraid of being killed, but because I do not know what I will eat tomorrow and where I will get something to do so that I can get some food to my family. If you eat today, thank God and pray for tomorrow. You can't budget for a week or one month, because prices are not permanent. Today you buy maize flour at 50 kg for SSP 15,000. Tomorrow you will get it in the same shop at SSP 16,000. So, tell me, how can you budget in this kind of situation? (Respondent 1)

Respondent 2 was a month into working in his new job, which had been more all-consuming than he had expected: 'There is no rest. We work throughout the day and night for one week, then I come home for one day. It is better than doing nothing at home.' Also, his initial salary expectations of between US\$500 and US\$600 a month had not been met, so he had to give up on his hopes to facilitate a return to South Sudan for his sister and her children: 'What I am getting will not feed all of us. So [my sister] has to remain there until things get a bit okay. That is when I will think of bringing them to Juba.' This was a big blow for him, and chimed with his broader experience that the economic situation in South Sudan was becoming ever more challenging. His assessment was that, unlike in other countries, the economic difficulties were not connected to Covid-19 and that much of the difficulties were due to a government not interested in helping its people.

Respondent 6's first wife and children were doing well in his home town and he was able to communicate with them daily. His biggest relief was that they had enough to eat because they could grow food on the grandparents' farm. He had not been able to speak to his second wife or the children from that marriage, because they were staying in an area without mobile phone coverage. If he had money, he would like to go and see them to sort out the tensions with his in-laws, but he saw no possibility of getting money.

Respondent 7 was continuing to travel to his village to farm and was waiting for the harvest, which was due at

the end of the month. He was expecting a surplus harvest, but said he could not sell in the market as nobody was buying, and he could not export to Uganda due to the lack of peace. It was another example of poor leadership of the government for him: 'Why is the economy of the country dying in their hands? To me, it is lack of leadership among our leaders to rule the country.'

Respondent 8 had given up trying to find a job 'because of the time I am wasting looking for job, which I don't get. It is better for me to look for what I can eat for that day'. He said sometimes he felt it was miraculous when he found something to eat.

Changes and standstill

Respondent 5, who had been unsure about the whereabouts of her husband, had learned that he had been killed, but she did not know any details:

I was just told that he was killed in Upper Nile, so that is it. They didn't tell me what happened to him; I tried to reach his people, all in vain. So up to now, I don't know what to do with the kids and I cannot take them to my people because my people were not in support of our marriage. They didn't want me to marry him. (Respondent 5)

Respondent 1 said: 'I have not seen any change in my life. There is nothing that has changed for me over the past month. I still go through what I have been going through. Life remains the same.' He had felt that his previous decision to not flee to Uganda had been vindicated since he heard that many people who had fled to Uganda were mistreated there and wanted to come back to South Sudan, even if they were to die of hunger at home: 'They went [to Uganda] because they were fearing the war. But, now there is no war in the country, it is better for them to come and die of hunger here and not suffer in Uganda.' He himself still felt very much that there was nothing he could do: leaving Juba was unsafe and going to Kenya or Uganda was also unsafe.

Because Respondent 6's job hunt was time consuming and so far unsuccessful, he envisioned being by himself in Juba for quite a while:

Juba needs one to be without family if one is not working. Because if you don't eat for a day, you will not think much. But with family, you will not sleep at night thinking, 'What will I do to feed the family tomorrow?' Now, without family, I am not thinking

much and I can go for two days without eating, but still fine knowing that my family is doing well in [my home town]. (Respondent 6)

Respondent 3's plans to return to his home village had been destroyed by communal fighting and displacement there. Respondent 4 was still trying to work out how he might be able to get back to Malakal with his family.

Nothing had changed for Respondent 7, although he was acknowledging that the government was trying to make 'small changes... but they have no impact on the situation we have reached now as a country'. In his personal life, Respondent 8 had not seen any change for the better; instead, things were getting harder every day. He was observing that women particularly were struggling:

I have witnessed so many times women talking to themselves alone. You will think that they are talking with someone, but when you come closer, you find that she is talking alone. The reason to me is that the conditions that she is going through are beyond her capacity, things are hard for her. (Respondent 8)

4.5 October 2020

Covid-19

Respondent 2 reported one noticeable change: Covid-19 seemed to have disappeared: 'Coronavirus is not a problem to people of South Sudan. They don't think of it being dangerous to their life any more... Everybody is thinking of what to eat and where to get it from.' However, Respondent 6 felt that the government was letting down future generations by using Covid-19 as an excuse not to open schools, which was increasing teenage pregnancies.

Peace process and governance

Respondent 6 had little hope for peace, as nothing seemed to change: there was still disagreement between the President and his First Vice-President about how the states would be allocated, which had resulted in lack of government at the state level. He was wondering when the formation of the Government of National Unity would actually be completed. Right now, he said:

all of what both parties are doing is just a waste of time... Tell me, where is the new face among the current leaders, are they not the same people from day one? Who will bring change to South Sudan? (Respondent 6)

Respondent 1 had heard that the government was cracking down on dissent, citing the example of a man who had written on his Facebook page that Kiir must go and had been in prison 'for three months now without being tried in the courts of law'. He said that expressing a view was now dangerous because:

many people have disappeared and continue to disappear in South Sudan from such cases. If one needs to express his or her view, you have to look around you first to know who is near you before you say anything about what you see that is not good with the government. (Respondent 1)

He said this was even a problem with media, when radio stations invited people to call in to share their views because:

if you happen to say something that is real about that topic, your number will be intercepted and security personnel will start following you and arrest you. As for me, I don't get involved in any radio talk shows because of that. (Respondent 1)

He talked about increasing tensions between different groups of people, with rumours swirling that all looting, robberies and unknown gunmen were from the people he belongs to. He said this had never been verified:

None of the looters, robbers and unknown gunmen has ever been arrested, so that we see that they are from [this] tribe. If they could arrest one and people see truly the person is from [this tribe], then we will accept that all of what is happening in Juba is being done by [members of this tribe] but that isn't there. To me, I can say not only [this] people are the ones doing bad things. There are many tribes that are doing crimes in South Sudan. Let us talk of the killings in other regions of South Sudan – is it also [this] people? All the crime in South Sudan is happening because of the situations people are living in. Civil servants are not paid for a period of nine to ten months – what do you expect them to do? For example, the soldiers who have guns and are not paid, they will turn their guns on people without guns. (Respondent 1)

Security continued to be a major problem, where not much had improved. Respondent 2 saw similarities with 2016:

These days you can see soldiers of different units along the major roads searching cars – for what, no one knows and they cannot tell what they are looking for. People's concern is that this was how the 2016 fighting started. (Respondent 2)

He said this opened up the possibility of something happening, but he did not know in what timeframe.

Respondent 3 did not think that the official line that the peace was broadly holding was credible:

The government officials are emphasising that the peace agreement is generally holding despite some pockets of insecurity in some parts of the country. Let us be honest to ourselves and tell the truth – there is nothing showing that the peace agreement is holding. It is not, and the insecurity we are talking about is all over the country, not parts of the country. (Respondent 3)

He did not think that the government plans for an election in 2022 were credible, because:

Who are those who are going to vote? Where are the citizens?... They need to implement the peace and bring people back from refugee camps from different countries. Then they think of election, not by signing up for it. Are they going to take the ballots to PoCs and refugee camps in Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia? (Respondent 3)

The situation was made worse by news that there had been fighting and starvation among soldiers in training centres: 'How does a country go for election when soldiers and citizens are divided?'

Respondent 1 had become disillusioned with the peace deal. He saw no commitment to implementation, and lots of internal fighting: 'The little hope that we had when they signed the peace deal in 2018, for peace in the country, has now faded.' Respondent 8 had heard that South Sudanese soldiers were being killed by the Ugandan army along the border, which had come in to grab land.¹² This was also due to lack of peace, he said – only because South Sudan was in disarray, did the Ugandan soldiers dare to come across the border. The absence of peace made any improvement impossible:

¹² The situation on this is unclear, but there have been reports of such incidents, for example in Solomon (2020).

If there is peace, all that is happening will not be there. The economic crisis will not be there because South Sudanese will be able to produce their own food rather than importing food from other countries, if there are good roads to bring food items from other states to Juba. Who will buy cassava from Uganda when we have them coming from Maridi, Yei and other parts of the country? (Respondent 8)

But the wounds, he said, would take a long time to heal:

It is easy to destroy, but takes time to rebuild. It was easy to destroy what people built in the two years of peace, but it is now years and it will take up to 50 years for us to rebuild what we destroyed in two years, and that is only when, or if, we happen to get strong leaders. (Respondent 8)

Respondent 7 had observed some movement: forming of the state governments, but still no fully formed Government of National Unity. He had heard that the President had received an award from the Universal Peace Federation on the occasion of the signing of the Sudanese peace deal in Juba on October 3:

Yes, he mediated the talks between Sudan opposition parties, and they signed it willingly. They looked at the interest of their country and above all they looked at the interest of their people and said, 'Let us sign the deal for peace to come to our people'. That is why they signed – for the interest of Sudanese, not based on the tribal or group interest, unlike in South Sudan... How can someone who doesn't want peace be given a peace award?... He deserves an award for killing, looting and rape, according to me, if they wanted to award him for what he has done and is still doing for the people of South Sudan... Up to now, people are still in the UN PoC. For more than seven years now, because they fear their security.¹³ (Respondent 7)

Respondent 7 also noted that, for Sudan, the peace deal had already brought relief in the dollar exchange rate.

Livelihood and survival

In October 2020, food security had not improved. But being food-insecure had become a way of life, said Respondent 1:

We are just pushing on with life as there is no new change in terms of survival. Sometimes you get food, sometimes you don't. That is what we are now used to. It is not new to us. By saying 'us', I mean there are many people who are going through a difficult life that humans are not supposed to go through. (Respondent 1)

He had been able to find a little work in a garage, 'like untying the nuts and removing the tyres'. There was no work available that would allow him to earn a living, and even growing his own food was not an option:

If you think of going to the nearby bushes to cultivate, you are putting your life in danger... There are two enemies in the bush. You can be killed by the government forces (which they usually refer to as unknown gunmen), or by the rebel group. (Respondent 1)

Respondent 2 had continued to work in the time-consuming job for less money than promised. It was 'tiresome but I have to do it. Because there is nothing that one can do to earn a living here in South Sudan.' Having a job had changed his life because 'at least I can manage to put food on the table for my family'. Yet, his income had not brought respite from broader economic uncertainty, due to food price rises and currency fluctuations:

Prices are up in the sky. What makes me confused is that when the price of the dollar goes up, it goes with the prices of items in the market. As the dollar price comes down a little bit, the prices of items remain up there, making life hard for poor citizens. (Respondent 2)

He thought that the government should do something to regulate this volatility, but was not.

In October, Respondent 4 had lost all hope that things were going to improve because the economic situation was just so bad:

I don't think things will get better as soon as people think. You can just see from what is happening with the economy of the country and citizens are living on God's mercy. Where in the world can a government not have any say concerning prices in the market? (Respondent 4)

¹³ See Richard (2020); a few months earlier, Kiir had been awarded a 'spoiler of peace' award by the Ugandan organisation Atrocities Watch Africa (Associated Press, 2020).

He was aggrieved about having heard that the Minister of Information had publicly said that South Sudanese people are lazy:

I beg to differ. Lazy? Is it right to brand South Sudanese 'lazy' people? Is he talking about people outside the government or including the officials? If all of us are lazy, it means we are ruled by a lazy government. A government that sleeps, a government that cannot produce, a government that relies on foreign handouts, a government that is on its knees from day one, a government that only begs, a government that has no plans for its people. We are idle because the government is idle too, and busy looting national resources that should be used to meet the needs of citizens.¹⁴ (Respondent 4)

With such disappointing talk, he said, he did not see peace as possible for another 50 years:

that is when our children will start getting peace in this country, where there is no more tribalism, when South Sudanese look at themselves as one, that is when peace will last for ever in this country. (Respondent 4)

Respondent 7's personal situation had deteriorated, since he could no longer travel to his village due to insecurity on the road. He was thus without a job and without access to produce. Others were not able to afford food either: 'Women are crying in the markets; they go with SSP 10,000 and what they get from that money is less than 5 kilos combined.'

Respondent 4 felt that the government and the SPLM/A-IO were actively making life harder:

For example, the Minister of Information came out publicly and said the government is going to change the currency and that people are to take their money to the bank, otherwise they will lose it. The following morning, the rate of the dollar jumped by 47 to 83 per one dollar and the traders closed their business. All markets in Juba were closed. People were about to die. Prices went three times higher: one bread was going for SSP 50 from SSP 20 in just a matter of hours. The President had to call an urgent meeting that week, and said there is nothing that the government is going to do to change currency. It was

just a proposal, not a decision, so the public should not panic and traders should open the market for the citizens. After the urgent meeting with the President the following morning, the dollar dropped from 82 to 45. Up to now, it is still at 45. So, you can see that the government is having a hand in the suffering of South Sudanese. Most of the crisis is caused by the government and that alone can tell the world that the leaders don't want peace for their people.¹⁵ (Respondent 4)

Changes and standstill

In October 2020, Respondent 5 could no longer be found. She had gone from her uncle's house, where she had been living with her children, leaving her children behind. She had no phone. Nobody knew where she might have gone or what might have happened to her. She has not been seen or heard of again, neither in Juba nor in her home village. Her children are with her uncle. The uncle reported her disappearance to the police. The uncle has since also left his house and moved.

Fighting in Respondent 3's village had become entrenched due to ongoing revenge killings. Otherwise, his life had not changed, but market prices continued to go up: 'Every day, people are crying and there is nothing that they can do to help themselves from what they are going through.' He felt stuck in this situation and stuck in Juba:

We, who are in Juba, are like people in prison. There is no way we can go out because there is no safe road leading out of Juba, so we have to cope with the situation in which one can go for three to four days without getting something to eat. And that is what is happening with some families now in Juba. (Respondent 3)

Respondent 6 felt that not much had changed: he was still job-hunting, his family was doing ok in his home area, and his other family was out of touch. The job hunt was getting more discouraging, as aid-funded programmes were closing down and many who had worked for NGOs were now jobless. He said none of these programmes would come back unless there was peace. He had no faith in how the implementation of the peace process was going. He also linked continuing price rises to the lack of peace.

¹⁴ This echoes a commentary published by South Sudan News 24 (Koma, 2020).

¹⁵ See Reuters Staff (2020b) and Xinhua (2020).

Respondent 6 was also worried about developing conflict dynamics, having heard that there was internal tension in the SPLM/A-IO and that the government was not passing out the unified forces because they could not equip them with weapons due to international weapons embargoes (Al Jazeera, 2020). He was reflecting on recent events around the announcement of a change of currency 'which made the dollar to go from SSP 45 to 83 in a matter of 24 hours only, which also resulted in the closing of shops and markets'. His timeline for assessing the damage being done to South Sudan was expanding. He was now talking about how the things happening today were going to influence the life of future generations – such as the phenomenon of older men with money marrying girls as young as 13, 'which is so bad for the coming generation. This lady could be somebody in the future if educated for the country, but because of the conditions she has to be married off.'

Respondent 8 had heard about devastating floods in Bor that had displaced all people, and was observing that the government was not helping (Reliefweb, 2020). He did not see any way for things to change any more, as he saw the seeds of future problems being planted today: 'It is a big task for the youth that they need to work on by educating the uneducated people in the villages about the importance of being one people of one nation.' For himself, life had come to a standstill: 'Nothing has ever changed for the good, for me.' He had not been able to find a job and was living a daily hand-to-mouth existence.

Respondent 7 had just come from a funeral of a prominent person killed by unknown gunmen. He felt that things had taken a turn for the worse:

What is happening now in the country is the opposite of positive. When night comes, one is praying: 'God, will I reach morning?' When morning comes, one is again asking: 'God, what will I eat for the day?' All these questions are directed to God because there is no one to answer the questions apart from him.
(Respondent 7)

This respondent described his life as 'beyond human understanding'.

4.6 How did the respondents simultaneously experience rapid change and standstill?

Many of the developments, particularly in the implementation of the peace process, that Respondent 1 talked about had been broadcast via official channels.

Some of the rumours he mentioned are common rumours that have kept reappearing, such as the suspected illness of the President or the blaming of one particular group. Often, they are interspersed with placing developing, often conflictual, dynamics into a context.

Respondent 2 witnessed developments around him (or heard rumours) that he linked to previous similar situations that then resulted in renewed fighting. This presented a situation that he felt could quickly deteriorate. Even though his own economic situation had improved, he had been promised a higher salary than he was eventually paid, curtailing his ability to follow up on his plans. In many ways, all his salary had done was buffer him against the rapid change in food prices.

Respondent 3 was feeling at the receiving end of forces that he had no power to influence, notably the food prices and currency fluctuations. His major concern, however, was to see that the government had also seemingly declared its inability to influence the economic situation. He was finding it very difficult to see entry points for positive change and concluded that signs were pointing towards deterioration.

Respondent 4 very acutely experienced the currency fluctuations and price rises – to the extent that he verified for himself why his money was not buying much in the market. Yet, while his own situation of not being able to afford food was unchanged, the situation around him continued to deteriorate rapidly, contributing to feelings of powerlessness and loss of hope.

Respondent 5 had been increasingly desperate regarding her situation and was unable to see a way out towards change, while observing negative developments around her. There is no information about what might have happened to her. She could have become a victim of a crime. She might have chosen to go to a refugee camp, but leaving her children behind makes this option unlikely. She might have seen no future in which she could provide for her children and taken a decision on the basis of that. She was a woman with no hope for herself and her children in a country that was offering nothing to give her a perspective that things might change. Her disappearance is a tragic consequence.

Respondent 6 was experiencing much turmoil in his private life, which was closely connected to the economic and political situation around him. He often linked his own and broader social trends to the lack of political progress in implementation of the peace

agreement, creating an experience of contradiction between developing dynamics and things broadly staying the same.

Respondent 7 was noticing small changes being made, but these stood in stark contrast to a deteriorating situation. He was noticing the dynamics worsening in ways that for him pointed towards renewed conflict. He was losing his personal support network of being able to travel to the village to harvest from his fields. This was no longer possible towards the end of the interview period, due to worsening security. He was

particularly aggrieved by the lack of responsibility taken by the national leadership, and by recognition given to President Kiir for being a peace broker in Sudan without implementing peace at home.

Respondent 8 consistently referred to developments that had been reported in the news and was less likely to refer to rumours. His frustration with his unsuccessful job hunt, and seeing job possibilities diminish due to reduced international engagement, might have contributed to the very long timeline over which he expected change to happen.

5 Conclusion and implications

The portraits of eight lives in Juba over the course of six months in 2020 show a devastating picture of struggle for survival, fear, hardship and ever-increasing uncertainty. The insights into the respondents' lives also offer another side to the notion of an 'infodemic' connected to Covid-19. The WHO has identified the phenomenon of an infodemic as 'too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak' that 'causes confusion and risk-taking behaviours that can harm health' as well as leading 'to mistrust in health authorities', which in turn 'undermines the public health response' (WHO, nd).

While scholarship would suggest also that, in situations of disease outbreak, rumours are particularly powerful and proliferate as a way to make sense of the situation, the eight people who gave some insights into their lives here seemed largely unaffected by rumours. They had heard pieces of information – some of them accurate, some of them speculation – but because their everyday survival was so difficult, these pieces of information did not create particular reactions or actions. Chains between misinformation and mobilisation – very prominent in other contexts – were simply not relevant in these lives under extreme economic, social and political distress.

This finding has several implications. The most devastating is that, with further cuts to aid budgets and aid funding going to South Sudan, the economic hardship is likely to continue even longer. The daily struggle is already brutal and, unless measures to stabilise currency exchange rates and food prices are put in place, the devastating situation of hunger and famine will continue. This is a terrible prospect for a population that has been battered by war and violence for so many years.

For the implementation of the peace deal, the insights in this report are equally disheartening: there is very little trust among the respondents that this peace deal will work. The mental landscape continues to accumulate disappointment following broken promises of peace. Each time this happens makes it less likely that the population can find some hope and energy to engage the next time round.

Situated within the infodemic of Covid-19, how the respondents received and acted upon information gives profound insights into the need to re-examine the link between information and behaviour. Rumours play less of a role, and misinformation is less of a problem, if a population is so hindered from taking any action. This indicates a less urgent need to address misinformation.

If the room for action is so curtailed, the issue is not whether information is good or bad, and whether bad information leads to damaging decisions. Rather, these findings point towards the suggestion that information of any kind might serve less of a purpose than expected because it cannot push people under duress to make decisions either way.

What these profiles of respondents, and their patterns of life and experiences of the world around them, show is a population in extreme distress, emotionally drained and on the cusp of no longer being able to survive. That one respondent probably took the conscious choice to leave her children behind – although we do not know where she went, whether she went by choice, or even whether she is still alive – indicates the depth of despair.

The respondents all expressed thinking in very long timelines for change to happen – timelines meaning that they themselves would not benefit from any positive

change. Future engagement in South Sudan, whether it is to support the implementation of the peace agreement, stabilise the economic situation or deliver humanitarian aid, needs to be conducted with an awareness of how many economic, social and emotional challenges the people of South Sudan are facing every day, and of the consequent emotional impacts. Giving people hope that things can change in their lifetime – and not destroying that hope – is important. Programme design requires consideration of how it can support the dignity of people who have endured so much.

However, programmes cannot rely on supporting change and dignity through information and awareness campaigns alone. This insight has to create a moment of reckoning for those offering programmatic support to people in such difficult situations. Information campaigns and awareness raising are unlikely to offer much hope to people who have gone without it for so long.

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Annex 1: Rapid change and standstill: overview table, May to October 2020

	Rapid change	Standstill
May		
Respondent 1	Rumours of fighters being mobilised	There is nothing that I can do
Respondent 4	Returned to ten states; war in 36 months; national security mobilising	Unable to pay food prices; trying to get to home town
Respondent 8	Need to change timeline for implementation	Job-hunting
June		
Respondent 1	Coronavirus is deadly in South Sudan; deadlock in the peace talks	Leaving any decisions or preparations to God is the only option
Respondent 2	Leadership making clear that they are not interested in peace	Nothing changing, peace not moving forward
Respondent 3	Juba security improving	Rest of the country not improving; improvement will take 50 years
Respondent 5	Prices in the market going up, hard to survive on SSP 3,000/day	No development in the interim period
Respondent 6	Other countries encroaching on South Sudan's borders	Improvement will take years; waiting for appointment of governors
Respondent 7	Eight out of ten state governors appointed	Country is in a total mess
June		
Respondent 1	Food prices and rising inflation; pandemic considered over; withdrawal of international interest in South Sudan	Nothing has changed; abandoned idea to go to the camp in Uganda
Respondent 2	New job, possibility of getting his sister home	No progress in peace implementation
Respondent 3	Considering going back to the village; food prices unaffordable	Peace still not implemented
Respondent 4	Corona is happening; but starvation is worse	Uganda and China supporting South Sudan despite everything
Respondent 5	Her business has folded, market prices going up	Covid is not showing any impact, no news about her husband
Respondent 6	Both wives gone; job loss; trying to rent out house; planning to go to court over custody	Fighting going on
August		
Respondent 1	President appoints embezzlement commission; Covid disappeared	No change in my life; it was good not to go to the camp
Respondent 2	Organised crime taking over Juba	No improvement expected for 50 years; too little salary to afford to get his sister home

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	Rapid change	Standstill
Respondent 3	Pandemic over, but unified forces might be passed out	At a complete loss what to do; no credible peace implementation; return to village not possible
Respondent 4	Peace not implemented; fighting in Juba imminent	Unable to pay food prices; trying to get to home town
Respondent 5	Husband declared dead; lost her home; hard to survive on SSP 5,000/day; feels like dynamics are building up towards fighting	Covid is not happening
Respondent 7	Currency fluctuation, expects fighting	SPLM not taking responsibility
Respondent 8	NGOs closing	Job-hunting; peace deal not happening; nothing changing
September		
Respondent 1	Dissent crackdown; increasing inter-group tension; no more hope for a credible implementation of the peace deal	Food insecurity unchanged; life unchanged
Respondent 2	Security situation deteriorating; no more Covid in South Sudan	Extreme food insecurity; something bad about to happen but not clear when
Respondent 3	Rumours of soldiers fighting among themselves in training centres; elections planned for 2022	Food situation deteriorating; fighting in village entrenched
Respondent 4	Continued currency fluctuation	Unable to pay food prices; no change expected for 50 years
Respondent 5	The respondent had disappeared, leaving her children behind with relatives; her disappearance had been reported to the police	
Respondent 6	Dollar and food prices; night robberies back	Can't find job, sometimes goes without food, no unified army despite two years of promises
Respondent 7	Harvest coming up, deteriorating dynamics	Unchanged despite small changes; lack of leadership; no peace deal implementation
Respondent 8	Minister of Finance replaced; hoping for stabilisation in currency	Change only possible in the next generation
October		
Respondent 4	Currency to be changed causing economic crisis	Unable to pay food prices
Respondent 6	Food prices rising, currency and dollar	Still not communicating with one family, peace process not credible
Respondent 7	Funeral of a person killed by unknown gunmen; Kiir given a peace award; can no longer travel to village	People still in PoC; no job, no access to food
Respondent 8	Border skirmishes	No more job hunt; no more peace implementation; stuck with no positive change; daily struggle to have enough food

Annex 2: Interview schedule 2020

	1st interview	2nd interview	3rd interview	4th interview	5th interview
Respondent 1: male, forties	8 May	1 June	3 August	7 September	5 October
Respondent 2: male, late forties	11 May	3 June	5 August	9 September	7 October
Respondent 3: male, very late forties	15 May	7 June	8 August	11 September	9 October
Respondent 4: male, late thirties	12 June	11 August	14 September	9 October	
Respondent 5: female, late thirties	15 June	13 August	16 September	Attempted on 13 October, but respondent missing	
Respondent 6: male, thirties	19 June	17 August	18 September	13 October	
Respondent 7: male, age undisclosed	30 June	21 August	18 September	15 October	
Respondent 8: male, age undisclosed	24 May	24 August	23 September	27 October	



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