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The Need to Read: Improving Education in South Sudan

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” – Nelson Mandela

Obtaining an education often seems like a given expectation to many across the globe, but for the children that make up the South Sudan population, obtaining a quality, secure education is nearly a miracle. The country of South Sudan, officially known as the Republic of South Sudan, is facing a threatening humanitarian crisis due to food insecurity, COVID-19 impacts, and a poor economic status. According to the World Bank, “expenditures on key social sectors including health, education, water and sanitation, and agriculture and rural development are limited” (World Bank). Education happens to be one of the lowest expenditures out of all of these listed in the world. Severe poverty levels damper education access in this landlocked country with a growing population of 11.4 million people. The World Bank reports that, “about 82% of the population in South Sudan is poor according to the most recent estimates, based on the \$1.90 2011 purchasing power parity poverty line” (World Bank). According to ReliefWeb, “in recent years, the country has seen a significant increase in the number of out-of-school children, from 2.2 million in 2018 to 2.8 million in 2020. This does not include the 2 million children out of school due to Covid closures” (ReliefWeb). Given South Sudan’s already vulnerable economy, the global pandemic has obstructed the lives of those who reside here because of their lack of basic healthcare and other needs. With over two million children and 8000 primary schools (most shut down from 2020 to late 2021), it is then quite obvious that getting students in the classroom is difficult for more than one reason. The lack of funding for technology and advanced education options are also severely scarce; leaving the people of South Sudan no choice but to not be properly educated. Lack of education is an epidemic in itself. There are only 120 secondary schools in South Sudan as well as only one recognized university. In addition to the lack of post-primary education centers, 63% of teachers in South Sudan teach without formal schooling or training (World Bank).

It is important to note that the Republic of South Sudan gained its independence from North Sudan in 2011, making it the youngest country globally (Evason). “Despite its recent secession, the country continues to face serious civil unrest and endemic violence. Almost two million people have been internally displaced since the outbreak of civil war in 2013” (Evason). When looking at South Sudan’s demographics, it is vital to note that approximately 41.6% of their population is children under fifteen, while less than 7% of South Sudan’s civilians are over the age of 55 (Evason). These statistics show how life-altering their civil war and secession have been to their people: cutting their life expectancy and quality of life exponentially. In addition to years of civil corruption, South Sudan has not been able to break the chains of desperation. Although they finally earned their respected freedom, it has come with an immense price. As mentioned previously, South Sudan lacks infrastructure, roads and vehicles in addition to other modern technology. According to Cultural Atlas, “It is estimated roughly 80% of the population lives in rural areas. In these rural areas, people may be unfamiliar with modern-day utilities and technologies” (Evason). South Sudanese tribes have clung to their religion and traditions throughout their hardships as a country at whole. There are more than 60 different ethnic groups that make up South Sudan. Despite their unique tribal heritages, Christianity is the center of mosts’ beliefs (Evason). “Traditional tribal social structures and customary law form the basis of most rural communities’ social organization” (Evason). Customary law is designed to achieve neutrality among citizens when it comes co-existing in a community. “The rules surrounding marriage, divorce and child custody are matters of the home, not the state. The government is generally not involved in enforcing laws or punishment. Rather, most matters are resolved and circumscribed within communities through tribal courts” (Evason).

Because of the true “newness” of the Republic of South Sudan, it is clear to understand that there are evident instabilities within the government structure. The people of South Sudan have held their morals and cultural beliefs close through times of exile and terror that many had to endure. Their cultural roots run deep in all aspects of their lives; including their careers, family structures, cuisine, and outlook on the future as a new nation.

While it is important for one to cling to their values, cultural and religious ideals are putting more young girls out of obtaining an education than boys. According to UNICEF, “It is a long cultural tradition for parents to marry their daughters off in exchange for dowry” (UNICEF). Child marriage disables young girls from being able to achieve an education due to the responsibilities thrown onto them with becoming a wife, laborer and mother. UNICEF also mentions that while *it is* possible for girls to go through school while married or as a mother, the daunting issues are not far from attacking their dreams; balancing a home life, the expenses affiliated with school, and gender inequality in the classroom (UNICEF). It is shockingly, statistically proven that girls in South Sudan between the ages of 15 and 19 have a higher chance of dying during childbirth than finishing their primary education (UNICEF). If child marriage is not in the picture, traditional Southern Sudanese households tend to hold back their female children to work and send their male children to school if they happen to be financially able to. Another heartbreaking factor that impacts young girls from obtaining an education is the risks associated with traveling to and from school. With schools being so scarce, it is not uncommon for those attending school to travel for hours a day just to get to and from the classroom. Young women face the dangers of human trafficking, rape, and other diabolical schemes while covering large distances during the day and into the night time (UNICEF).

“The distance to the schools has also contributed to the low attendance of girl students. Females consider themselves as vulnerable and can easily be outpowered by any force and subjected to things like rape, kidnapping and many other sorts of inhumane activities.” – *Esther Yongoro, 17 years old*

As briefly touched on previously, gender inequality is another pressing issue that is keeping girls out of the classroom. UNICEF states, “Gender is the social pattern of behavior and psychological or emotional expression of attitudes that distinguish male and females in society and in school. This socialization has affected the girl in terms of access to education, completion and achievement” (UNICEF). Sudanese societies pin a stereotype on their girls; caretakers of men. These ideas instill mass amounts of lack of confidence into the minds of many young girls. To put this into perspective, the Girl’s Education South Sudan states, “only 16 percent of the female population over [age] 15 is literate, compared to 40 percent for male” (Henderlight).

Young females in South Sudan have to deal with a plethora of setbacks to achieve an education in a country that already faces an education crisis for all of its children. While it seems too far out of reach to ever receive a clear solution for South Sudan’s education epidemic, I believe that multiple implementations of a variety of programs in relation to youth safety and global education can help bring more students, both male and especially female, into the prospering classrooms. Regardless of the educational issues alone, I deem it greatly necessary that the entirety of the South Sudan population have access to resources in relation to human trafficking. Due to the country’s general instability, it has become crime-filled and dangerous. According to The Borgen Project, “[As a result of instability], conflict-related, sexually violent crimes throughout the country have had an unwavering presence while human trafficking in South Sudan is also prevalent” (Philipp). Human traffickers most commonly sexually exploit females in the capital of South Sudan, Juba (Philipp). When exploring the geographical makeup of South Sudan and looking back to when I mentioned how rare and scarce their schools are, it is also highly common for young girls to be taken from vastly rural areas and move towards the urban areas with their abuser henceforth making it a high risk to migrate to and from school. As human-trafficking awareness is becoming more prevalent in the United States, I think implementing a non-profit and

providing safe resources for the people of South Sudan would be beneficial to at least motivate and provide security for its people; specifically its young girls. The International Justice Mission (IJM) is a global organization that is ultimately working to end human trafficking. The organization has branched out to fourteen different countries, including the continent of Africa, and is rapidly expanding its horizons (International Justice Movement). The IJM rescued more than 7,200 people from slavery in 2021 (International Justice Movement). According to The Borgen Project, With support from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan, over 700 officers of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, as well as 150 SPLA-IO/RM (the pro-Riek Machar Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition) officers, received training focused on legal frameworks prohibiting the use of sexual violence" (Philipp). By continuing to install and promote programs and provide resources, along with an upward trend of economic growth, sexually violent crimes and the capturing of young children and woman are likely to diminish.

As it gets increasingly safer to attend school in South Sudan, the next question I must pose is, how can the quality of education grow and meet the needs of those in South Sudan? According to the World Bank, "The signing of the latest truce in September 2018 and subsequent formation of a unity government in February 2020 have provided a large measure of hope for recovery and peace building" (World Bank). The coronavirus outbreak, first seen in March of 2020 in South Sudan, set the entire world back, but South Sudan has begun to see impacts fade. In the early months of 2022, the numbers of those impacted by the virus have decreased significantly with the help of the vaccine distribution (John Hopkins). Where do we go now? The short answer is, The Global Partnership for Education. The Global Partnership for Education (GPE) is working to help South Sudan gain reliable and impactful educational facilities, teachers, and materials for students. This organization is currently going through the stages of the General Education Sector Plan (GESP). This sector plan ranges from 2017 to 2022. As explained by The Global Partnership for Education breaks down this plan into two different phases: "the first two years of the GESP are framed as a transitional plan that is expected to rapidly increase enrollment along with building new infrastructure, supplying basic teaching and learning materials, regularizing teacher salary and training teachers to cope with the increased enrollment. The following three years of the GESP are focused on institutionalizing teacher training, school supervision, and expansion of secondary and technical education" (The Global Partnership for Education). They are continuously receiving grants from large nonprofits globally and are responding to the pandemic forcefully. The GPE, UNICEF, and other large nonprofits are providing a backbone for the developing educational practices in South Sudan.

In addition to the incredible efforts being made by both the government of South Sudan and nonprofits, I have an idea that would enrich the lives of more than just the Southern Sudanese students. Granted that English is the most commonly taught language in South Sudan, why not send Americans over to educate the educators and enhance the quality of which information is delivered to those in all stages of school? I was recently engaged in a conversation with a co-worker of mine. She is currently going to Iowa State University and is studying Early Childhood Education with the ultimate goal of being a teacher. We were discussing the timeline of what the rest of her college years will look like and what really sparked my attention was when she told me she was going to be paid throughout the duration of her student-teaching opportunity. I found this very intriguing as I was always under the impression that student teaching was not a paid experience due to it being a component of achieving that specific degree. In the spring of 2023, she will be getting paid roughly nine thousand dollars to student-teach in a suburb of Omaha. If these kinds of incentives can be provided within the United States, why would a similar concept be applicable to South Sudan? It is not uncommon for those in the teaching field to minor in a foreign language to set themselves apart in the workforce. The language barrier would not even be a large issue for United States students due to English being commonly spoken and taught in South Sudan. For those who have both a passion for teaching and expanding their lives culturally, I believe a potential program designed to send American college students to student-teach in South Sudan would be advantageous for both American and Southern Sudanese students. Given that the United States is educationally rich, our levels of education are

much more advanced than South Sudan's. This enables our students to be equipped with the knowledge they need to bring a struggling country's education up to speed. I think with significant efforts provided by the United States's government, South Sudan's government, global organizations, and passionate future teachers, the quality of education can be tremendously healthier for South Sudan students. Here is how it would work. For college students interested in teaching in South Sudan, they would complete the standard classes required to acquire their Bachelor's degree (but with a twist). Nearing their final semesters of college, when one traditionally completes student-teaching, the student would prepare by orienting their studies towards learning about South Sudan's culture, geography, demographics, and any other necessary areas of study. In addition, they would work with their university and whomever else on the other side of this exchange to prepare for their extended visit in South Sudan. The university would ideally work with state legislature or national government outlets to fund their student-teaching trips. It would be critical for all students, professors and other faculty who are taking the trip overseas to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, as well as any other international vaccination requirements. They would then go and teach children of all ages according to their focal age group or subject. I envision this program lasting anywhere from six weeks to a full semester's worth of time. It would be important to compensate these students for their time and dedication to their students. I also have an alternate solution if compensation is not adequate. I believe that a scholarship opportunity would also encourage American students to act on this opportunity. The scholarship could be funded by the university or by an outside figure who is passionate about South Sudan's education crisis and is gracious enough to fund a scholarship or scholarship program. As someone who personally finds an immense amount of learning and opportunity in traveling, I believe this opportunity would inspire many young college students to expand their horizons. Just as my friend is getting paid to go to Omaha, the student teacher could potentially be paid for their teaching experience in South Sudan or have the trip itself covered for them. As the country of South Sudan continues to gain economic stability and recover from its decade-long setbacks, I firmly believe that the partnership of the United States and South Sudan in relation to amplifying the caliber of education in South Sudan.

There are no guarantees that this teaching opportunity would capture the attention (or the hearts) of those who hold political roles. I firmly believe that if the the government is not in favor of funding such a project idea as mine, private universities and organizations may be able to work around the idea of needing to rely on the government. Through different fundraising opportunities or collaboration with various non-profits, I believe that trips could still be coordinated and funded for American students to make an impact. I am convinced that if there is a large enough passion to make a difference, a difference can indeed be made.

“Education breeds confidence. Confidence breeds hope. Hope breeds peace.” – Confucius

Fortunately, the South Sudan government does see its education barriers and is on the right track to diminishing its errors. According to the World Bank, “the economy had picked up strongly before the COVID-19 pandemic, with gross domestic product (GDP) growth reaching 9.5 percent in 2019/20” (World Bank). There is not a singular doubt in my mind that South Sudan isn't heading in the right direction to peace and prosperity. I believe that with the relief provided by gracious organizations, increased employment, recovery from the pandemic, and a growing economy will only enable South Sudan to improve its education for its citizens. The implementation of an American-based program will also improve the quality of academics for those receiving an education in South Sudan. For all of the young women suffering from education inequality and for those who have been robbed of an education in South Sudan, I have confidence that access to an exceptional education is not too far out of reach. It will take valuable time and precious resources, but if there is a will, there is a way. Everyone deserves to have the ability to read novels, write poems, conduct chemistry experiments and grow into smart, well-rounded beings. To me, education is a basic human right. I am beyond blessed that I have the capabilities to

research and conduct such an essay as this one. I believe in a future that enables young girls and boys in South Sudan to do the same as me.

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