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Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises

TECHNICAL REPORT

DYNAMIC LIVELIHOODS IN CONFLICT AND RECURRENT CRISES

Stories of change from Ethiopia and South Sudan

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About SPARC

Climate change, armed conflict, environmental fragility and weak governance, and the impact these have on natural resource-based livelihoods, are among the key drivers of both crisis and poverty for communities in some of the world's most vulnerable and conflict-affected countries.

Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) aims to generate evidence and address knowledge gaps to build the resilience of millions of pastoralists, agro-pastoralists and farmers in these communities in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

We strive to create impact by using research and evidence to develop knowledge that improves how the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), donors, non-governmental organisations, local and national governments, and civil society can empower these communities in the context of climate change.

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The motivation for this research

We set out to collect individual stories of local innovation and change in people's livelihoods in Ethiopia (Mekelle) and in South Sudan (Bor and Nzara counties). The aim was straightforward. We wanted to understand changes in livelihoods, the conditions that facilitated these changes and what facilitated their spread.

Understanding the dynamics of change is important. In places affected by recurrent crises and conflict, we know from experience that people's livelihoods are dynamic. In the face of uncertainty, many people look to reinvent their livelihoods; they may innovate, copy, change or adapt. But those seeking to support them, i.e. their governments and the aid sector, do not always seek to understand the changes which people are already making, or the opportunities and the constraints they face in doing so. This may be leading to loss of focus on the needs and interests of the people those external actors are seeking to support.

This research presents the personal accounts of a number of people who have attempted to make changes and who have achieved some degree of success. Not everyone has such stories to tell. But documenting these selected stories offers policy-makers and others a different way of approaching the livelihoods of people affected by crises and conflict. It demonstrates that those challenged by uncertainty are not passive victims – rather, they are using their own agency to navigate crises and, where opportunity allows, seeking to advance their lives.

What kinds of change did we see?

Any generic description of how people make livelihood changes is likely to miss the rich diversity of the kinds of experimentation and innovation occurring, the reasons why people make changes, and the ways in which they manage their livelihood pathways.

Change occurred in several dimensions. Some changes could be described as technical, e.g. in farming or new ways of processing fish; some changes were economic, e.g. new sales techniques; while others had more social dimensions, e.g. women taking on previously unthinkable roles or how people arranged childcare to enable each other to work. Few of the changes we heard about were innovations in the sense of people inventing completely new ways of doing things. Ideas were often borrowed from others or skills picked up in one place were transferred to new locations.

Changes were driven both by constraints and by opportunities. Certain changes were made in response to uncertainty, the loss of previous ways of earning a living and the need to adapt to new surroundings. Others made changes to take advantage of new opportunities – or, in some cases, to a new way of thinking about what was possible that allowed them to see an opportunity for the first time.

Some people seem to have set out on a new pathway that they will continue to develop for the foreseeable future. Others have made changes that have been short-lived, either because they were forced to continually respond to changes in the external situation or to setbacks, or by choice. Choices could be unplanned, where people found a new opportunity to move into, or planned, where they had always intended to take on one activity, possibly a risky one, in order to open up the possibility of another, e.g. because they had saved up enough money or they had established a business that could then be formalised.

How do ideas travel?

Change, as explained above, came largely from borrowing ideas. This makes people's social networks and their exposure to what others are doing critical in driving change. Change often relied on the movement of people with their ideas. People who had travelled brought 'new' ideas back with them; many were exposed to new ideas by interacting with people from outside in local marketplaces; and some, e.g. those who had been displaced, relied on transferring their previous experience to a new location. Social and business networks were often highlighted in people's stories as the source of ideas and of new skills, opportunities and financial resources.

What enabled people to undertake change?

While there were some similarities in the types of barriers people faced across the two countries (e.g. poor infrastructure and services), they offered comparatively different contexts when it came to enablers of and barriers to change. Mekelle had just emerged from a 17-month blockade when the study was undertaken. Combined with mass displacement and conflict, this limited the kinds of change that were possible compared to the two counties in South Sudan. Personal accounts revealed more repeated setbacks. In South Sudan, it was not just that exposure to new ideas and opportunities was greater, there was also a totally different sense of change. More people spoke positively about how they saw all around them changes, both social and economic.

But while wider contextual factors can set the parameters within which people operate, this is only part of the story. In Mekelle, despite challenging circumstances, we still found people willing to take risks in order to re-establish their lives in new surroundings. In South Sudan, there were those who went against the grain, challenging social expectations in order to achieve their goals. This highlights how each change is made by an individual. Who they are plays a great role in the changes that they feel able to make. This is not simply about having economic means: having the confidence to take a leap can be just as important. People gained confidence in a variety of ways. Some had developed confidence earlier in life by having had to take risks out of necessity, which provided the confidence to take further risks. Many sought actively to boost their confidence by looking for networks or joining with others in small groups to undertake a new venture together. People also managed their risks by entering into a new venture in small steps, reducing the 'confidence threshold' needed for each new step.

What do our stories tell us about dynamic livelihoods and change?

Livelihoods are dynamic and we need to see them that way. This holds important lessons for governments, aid actors and others trying to support people's livelihoods in crises. People need the ability to acquire new skills or adapt these to new locations. Skillsets do not sit into neat categories (e.g. rural vs urban) and the important livelihood skills are not narrow technical abilities that are tied strictly to one way of working. (People find these for themselves, if they have the skills to do so.) But support for livelihoods is often offered in this narrow technical way as vocational training. In Mekelle, the situation was even more restricting, because many aid actors did not feel that it was possible to give people useful livelihood skills during displacement in an urban setting since they were expected to move back to their rural homes, where it was believed that the skills that might be useful for people in the city would have no relevance.

Context, context, context. The ability to undertake change can partly be explained by the wider context, as the three case studies showed. Some contexts may allow greater openness to new ideas, while in others people were more restricted to re-establishing a livelihood and regaining stability. This underlines the importance of understanding the changes people are trying to implement and why support for livelihoods must be based on understanding what people are trying to achieve: it cannot do the same things everywhere.

There is more to supporting livelihoods than skills and money. Skills and capital are important, but, as our stories revealed, they were not always the first barrier people faced. Access to social and business networks meant that people could sometimes obtain both capital and skills for themselves. Very often, the constraining factors to making progress were in the 'softer' domain of seeing what was possible, having confidence and being able to use social networks as support to get started. Rather than believing that the responsibility of external agencies is to provide what they believe is missing (skills and capital), it may often be more useful to put more focus on connecting people to networks where they can source ideas, guidance, encouragement and many other forms of support for themselves.

Work to reduce the entry barriers to dynamism and change. A helpful way of thinking about change is to take seriously the different kinds of barriers that people must overcome and to look for ways to lower the entry thresholds into new ventures.

This requires working at two levels:

- First, address the wider contextual barriers which affect the ability to undertake and sustain change. Whilst addressing some barriers (e.g. poor infrastructure) requires large investments, unlocking some of the barriers people face can require less investment. These include access to bank accounts, local identification to access loans, guarantors to access jobs and export procedures.

- Second, work at the individual level. While context can set the parameters within which people must operate, even in challenging environments there are people with the confidence to take risks, and people willing to challenge societal expectations. Understanding why some are willing to take risks while others may be reluctant may help to identify different ways of supporting change. How can the risk appetite of others be raised? What would it take to lower the risk barriers? In some cases, people are willing to be the first to take a leap, giving others the confidence to follow. Other people grow in confidence by working as part of a group or seeing others succeed.

Supporting a culture of change. The most striking innovation in South Sudan was a new way of seeing change. So many people spoke of a transformation where people had previously accepted a set way of life, but now people were openly looking for the life that would meet their needs – and their whole new sets of expectations. The myriad individual stories of change depended greatly on this underlying change, where people were actively seeking to find new ways of working. In some cases people linked this to innovations that had been brought in by international agencies over many years. This kind of transformation takes time, but if ways of supporting such cultural change can be found, it would appear to be a highly effective, sustainable and cost-effective way of approaching livelihood support.

Don't be more gender-conservative than women themselves. Changes in how women's place in society was seen was a big part of this wider sense of change in South Sudan. Despite still facing stigmatisation, some women were willing to challenge conservative values, even when others couldn't. International agencies may be reluctant to push certain cultural ideals, fearing that they might be seen as a foreign imposition. As a result, much livelihoods support follows fairly standard gendered patterns. But identifying change which people are already to trying to make for themselves offers an opening to promote livelihoods that go beyond local stereotypes and which therefore also help to promote a wider change both economically and for gender equality. The personal stories of women in South Sudan demonstrated that individual agency and environment do not act independently of each other. Women who were able to challenge the status quo helped lay a path for others to follow.

Fish market in Bor, Jonglei State, South Sudan. Credit: Elphas Ngugi /SPARC

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of the research

Many people familiar with the livelihoods of those affected by conflict and recurrent crises see these livelihoods as dynamic, and believe that in the struggle to cope and to adapt to changing difficulties and opportunities, many are reinventing their livelihoods, looking to innovate, copy, or change (Humphrey et al., 2023). However, documentation or analysis of livelihood change and innovation is limited, particularly in the aid sector (Sitati et al., 2021).

This matters. When aid agencies undertake assessments to support people in crises, their tools look at what people are doing (or at what they are unable to do). Livelihood assessment tools do not typically look at what people are changing or trying to change. This should be surprising. It seems reasonable to believe that a good starting point for any institution looking to support people to improve their livelihoods would be an understanding of the ways in which they are already trying to improve their own livelihoods – and the opportunities and constraints that they face in doing so.

This work set out to investigate what can be learned from examples of change: how it occurs, the factors that favour it, how to understand it – and how best to support it.

The study is based on research in Mekelle, Ethiopia and in Bor and Nzara counties in South Sudan. The research sought to understand how people are seeking to change their own livelihoods, by identifying a number of people who felt that they had been successful to some degree in making changes or adaptations to their livelihoods. The study then traced the life-histories of the changes to investigate in detail how they came about, their successes and their failures. The report then draws lessons that are of wide relevance for policy-makers and others who are interested in supporting people in challenging situations, such as those affected by conflicts and recurrent crises, to improve their ability to meet their needs and to advance their lives.

The aims of the research were modest – it did not try to capture all change for everyone and everywhere, but to find interesting personal stories about how people were able to undertake change. The research looked to uncover trends: to understand the conditions which facilitated these changes; the factors that allowed these changes to spread; and the barriers that constrained the spread of innovation and change to other people and places.

In documenting these stories of dynamic livelihoods and change, this research also hopes to challenge a common narrative that depicts people affected by crises as victims, and as needy or vulnerable. The examples presented here show that even in difficult places, people have agency and an ability to imagine a better future and, sometimes, can be successful in achieving this.

1.2 Methodology

The study asked people to give examples of positive changes in their livelihoods. The study did not seek to impose a definition of change or of success. Respondents were free to describe changes that related to their livelihood activities, market relations, social organisation, land tenure agreements, climate change adaptation and gender norms. People could offer stories which illustrated their own ingenuity in finding innovative ways to make a living, or simply how they had learned new ideas from others which they then replicated or adapted for themselves.

Individuals with successful stories to relate were identified in group discussions. In many cases, these were followed up by in-depth interviews with the individuals concerned. Other people with dynamic livelihoods were then identified from earlier respondents in a 'snowballing' process.

The first set of stories were collected from Mekelle, Ethiopia between June and September 2024. This included a total of 64 semi-structured interviews and 19 focus group discussions with IDPs and host communities.[1] Across both the interviews and the focus groups, 91 participants were male and 71 participants were female.

The second set of stories were collected from Nzara County and Bor County between October and December 2024. This included a total of 57 semi-structured interviews and 8 focus group discussions. Across both the interviews and the focus groups, 53 participants were male and 44 participants were female.

Discussions and interviews sought to identify positive changes at the local level, whether these were related to externally driven changes, deliberate interventions to support change in people's lives ('projects') or from people's own innovations and adaptations. We tried to understand the factors that enabled those changes to be successful and how far it was possible for these ideas, changes or innovations to spread. The study also looks at the different dynamics of change that have been experienced by men and women.

1.3 Context

Ethiopia

At the time of interviews, Mekelle in the Tigray region was still recovering from two years of fighting between the Tigray People's Liberation Front and the Government of Ethiopia. In 2022, the Pretoria Peace agreement was signed, but the risk of further outbreaks of violence remains. During the fighting the number of internally displaced people reached 2.6 million (UNHCR, 2022). Prior to data collection, in May 2024, the number of IDPs stood at 875,000 (IOM, 2024), although these numbers are contested and could be higher (Sturridge and Tufa, 2024).

The majority of those displaced had arrived in Mekelle as a result of the conflict and had been living there since 2020. There were also those who had arrived in Mekelle prior to 2020 as a result of drought, economic insecurity and wider ethnic tensions. IDPs were living among host communities, in IDP centres located in schools and health facilities and at the Seba Kare IDP camp located on the outskirts of Mekelle. The majority were displaced from within Tigray region, but also Amhara and Oromia regions. IDPs were displaced from both rural and urban locations,

1 For a full account of this research, see Sturridge and Tufa (2024).

which meant that their livelihoods prior to displacement were diverse. People had backgrounds in farming, trading businesses, or sometimes both, and there were also those who were employed in jobs such as security guards and factory workers (Sturridge and Tufa, 2024).

Conflict had a significant impact on the local economy in Mekelle. The fighting led to infrastructure damage and the direct targeting of crop and livestock farming, which are central to the local economy. During the conflict in 2021 the government of Ethiopia enforced a blockade on the region, shutting down key services such as banking, telecommunications, transport and electricity. It also prevented access to basic goods and supplies. People went without salaries, all of which led to the collapse of local businesses. Livelihoods were still struggling to return to pre-war levels of productivity.

The local economy has not only had to deal with the impact of conflict. It has also witnessed successive droughts since 2015 and locust plagues in 2020 and 2021, which killed livestock and resulted in poor harvests.

South Sudan

At the time of interviews, the situation in Nzara County and Bor County was relatively stable. Following independence from Sudan in 2011, civil war broke out in South Sudan in 2013 between two rival factions within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. Conflict was briefly interrupted in 2015 with the signing of the Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan, before resuming in 2016. This was followed by the signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in 2018. Although this reduced the overall levels of violence (Dawkins et al., 2023), it has failed to deliver a stable power-sharing arrangement or to address incentives for violence at the sub-national level, which can be instrumentalised by political elites in Juba to undermine political rivals (Craze, 2020; 2022). Both Bor County and Nzara County have witnessed insecurity since the signing of the R-ARCSS.

The Bor County economy includes pastoral and fishing sectors. It is also home to a major market in Bor Town, which has links to the capital, Juba. Agriculturally rich, Nzara County is part of the 'breadbasket' Equatoria region of South Sudan. This has resulted in commercial interest from foreign companies growing cash crops such as cotton and coffee. While, traditionally, farming has focused on growing crops, some of those we interviewed were moving towards mixed farming and keeping livestock (CSRF, n.d.a; CSRF, n.d.b).

As documented in other research covering livelihoods in South Sudan, there has been a shift towards a market economy (Thomas, 2020; Majok, 2021). While there were early developments of this prior to the second Sudanese civil war (1983–2005), it was this period of displacement, disruption of farming and loss of assets that saw people become increasingly dependent on markets for both food and work. Today, both aspirations and a need to meet basic needs have meant people are increasingly reliant on money to buy goods and services. A subsistence system of production and labour has given way to one driven by profit, in which people are producing to sell and are selling their labour both in the agriculture sector and in towns (Thomas, 2020). Some have struggled to adjust to this change. However, we specifically targeted those who had experienced positive change. From these people we got a sense of opportunity and aspiration as result of the new economy, with individuals looking out for the next business venture to invest in.

At the time of writing there were growing concerns that South Sudan risked falling back into civil war. The ways in which this could affect the outlook of those we interviewed are therefore yet to be seen.

2 STORIES OF DYNAMISM AND CREATIVITY FROM ETHIOPIA AND SOUTH SUDAN

This section provides an overview of the personal stories of change we heard in Ethiopia and South Sudan. The change we saw took on several aspects. Livelihoods were dynamic, with people switching between different ventures, transferring experience from one domain and location to the next. Rather than being fixated on what was original, people made the types of change that worked for them at that time. The ways in which people got their ideas depended on context. In South Sudan it was often about learning from other people, while in Ethiopia people relied on transferring skills and knowledge from one location to the next. Several factors enabled these changes to take place: access to financial resources; willingness to take risk; openness to change; and an environment that provided the space for change to take hold.

2.1 What kinds of change did we see?

The stories we collected covered different dimensions of change. Some described changes of a technical nature, such as the decision to transition from farming crops to rearing livestock or the use of new inputs such as pesticides. Others had an economic dimension, such as innovation in sales techniques by marketing products and services via social media. One businesswomen in Bor County described how she had established a successful direct-to-customer liquid soap business:

> I make and sell liquid soap for local businesses, such as restaurants, cleaning companies and car washes. I established a network of moto-taxi riders who deliver directly to my customers. I set up a WhatsApp group where customers can message me their orders, a rider comes to collect and delivers straight to the customers.... I wanted to expand my business, and this network of riders gives me an advantage. I can deliver soap to customers anytime, anywhere, even at night because of this network.

Others have changed their business models to suit a particular clientele. For example, one female restaurant owner in Nzara County built her business by observing footfall and daily routines and mirroring these in her selling practices:

> I started selling porridge around the hospital because I use to see a lot of people gathering there in the morning… gradually I started to sell porridge in containers around town, especially around bus stops and areas where motor-taxi riders would wait for business. Demand was high, so I had to recruit some young girls to help deliver tea and porridge… people's lives have changed. Now more people are working, they leave their homes early in the morning, travelling far from where they live… all these people need to eat… and this is both what my restaurant and delivery service is targeting.

Change was also social, such as women entering traditionally male-dominated sectors and new social networks being formed. For example, in Mekelle, displacement had resulted in the disruption of intra-household support systems and the emergence of new social networks among IDPs. These new networks were a key determinant of livelihood outcomes. Some of these networks provided free childcare, which enabled mothers to go out and work. New networks also formed around the casual labour markets. One man, who had been displaced from his family, described how a pivotal factor in being able to find work in his new surroundings was his ability to build an alternative network among youth groups who distributed daily labouring opportunities.

People would transfer knowledge or experience from one domain to another. One man we interviewed in Nzara County was originally a farmer, before joining an armed group to fight the Lord's Resistance Army. After leaving the armed group, the man established a successful cross-border smuggling business, transporting goods between South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The man explained that his wartime experience left him with a good knowledge of the border region and all the best routes to avoid detection. This made him and his team a popular choice among local businessmen on both sides of the DRC–South Sudan border looking to transport their goods between the two countries.

The ability to transfer knowledge and skills to a new situation is an important facility worth noting. The research found, in Ethiopia, that external actors can imagine there is a clear rural–urban divide when it comes to people's livelihoods. But individuals and family units can have a foot in both worlds (see Box 1). In Ethiopia, those displaced to Mekelle from rural locations included those who had both farming experience and business skills suited to an urban environment. For example, one woman who had been displaced from Zalambessa in Eastern Tigray had previously had several small businesses that included making and selling traditional Ethiopian food and drinks, while also rearing sheep and keeping chickens. In Mekelle, she is again making and selling food and drink for special holidays, weddings and other celebrations.

Similarly, in South Sudan, personal accounts illustrate that any idea of a neat divide between rural and urban is misguided, with people switching in both directions. Husbands described being in charge of the cattle and other farming activities, while their wives were taking advantage of new trading opportunities in the marketplaces in towns. Others were working in farming after previously having worked in non-farming sectors. For example, a former car garage owner transitioned away from repairing cars, firstly to become a broker in teak. He then transitioned again into farming, seeing the potential to invest and grow cash crops such as onions, cabbage and kale.

Fish market in Bor, Jonglei State, South Sudan. Credit: Elphas Ngugi/SPARC

Across interview sites in both Ethiopia and South Sudan, many of the new ideas people had adopted were not what might be considered original. Most of the change came from the spread of ideas and their adaptation to a new place. Personal stories revealed that people tend to be less concerned with concepts such as 'innovation' and 'positive change', and more concerned with focusing on what they know works well in the local environment. This type of change is not always dramatic.

BOX 1. TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

It is important to recognise the ability of individuals to adapt skills and strategies to new locations. IDPs who were able to transfer skills from locations they had been living in before being displaced to Mekelle were often able to survive or even build relatively stable livelihoods as a result. These included IDPs arriving from rural areas, whose livelihoods included crop farming, the rearing of livestock and dairy production. Despite people's assumptions, these IDPs had more than just technical farming knowledge. IDPs arriving from rural areas were already adept at livelihood diversification prior to displacement, practising farming alongside other business and trading activities traditionally associated with urban areas. Some IDPs arriving in Mekelle reported opening shops and restaurants and practising urban farming.

Aid actors working in Mekelle were often unaware of this continuity and transferring of skills among IDPs and viewed rural and urban areas as distinct economic categories. IDPs were believed to lack the skills applicable for the urban context; training for the urban environment was therefore seen to have little use for IDPs who may return to rural areas. This resulted in a lack of support for IDP livelihoods.

Source: Sturridge and Tufa (2024).

In the extremely difficult conditions in Mekelle, IDPs were focused on coping strategies, meaning that they largely fell back on what they knew. Many regarded livelihood creativity as a luxury that they could not afford, and even reacted with some hostility to being asked by the research team about any local positive changes or innovations. Yet despite this reaction, we still documented change among IDPs. Even in this context we found people who were willing to take a risk, or who were trying something new in order to build their business. For example, one woman in Mekelle created her own informal credit system, whereby she not only borrowed herself, but lent to others. She accepted that it came with the risk of people not paying her back, but it was the only way to attract more customers (see case study, Box 5).

Across both Ethiopia and South Sudan, changes were often quite small and short-lived, with people looking to change from one thing to the next. Such constant shifts make it harder to deliver support for change through a single external solution from the outside. For example, the evidence that people were able to find new skills – by themselves, by copying others or by working with others – calls into question the common interventional focus on skills training. External support might be better directed at unlocking opportunities, allowing people to find their own ways to exploit them.

BOX 2. CASE STUDY: 'WELCOME TO TOWN'

X[2] was originally from a rural village but relocated to town in 2014 with her children after the outbreak of civil war in South Sudan. Being used to village life, she quickly had to adapt to life in town:

> When I first came to town, I was shocked at how everyone looks after number one. There is no sharing, no family to support you.
>
> I started out working as a waitress in a local restaurant. I learned the importance of a daily wage and I began to learn from other businesswomen. After four years, my brother advised me to open a shop which sells tea and shisha. My brother first introduced me to his friend from Sudan, who taught me how to make shisha. Smoking shisha in town is illegal, but people do it openly and there is a high demand for it. My brother and I work as a team... [he] sources the ingredients and I do the selling.
>
> The one thing I've learned about living in town is that life is not easy and you have to take chances to make money. My friends are shocked at my lack of fear of getting caught, but I keep telling them 'Welcome to town'.

Source: authors.

2.2 Where do ideas come from?

The reliance on borrowing existing ideas and transferring skills meant that people were key in the transferring of ideas between individuals and places. From those we interviewed in South Sudan, several ways to access ideas stood out. First, individuals were exposed to new ideas either by witnessing ideas-in-practice or by meeting people who had travelled and learned different ways of doing things. Some interviewees from Nzara County spoke of how, when fighting during the wars of liberation against Sudan, their mixing with other communities in South Sudan exposed them to the rearing of livestock, learning how to go about it and how to make money from it (see case study, Box 4). For others, it was displacement during conflict which exposed them to new ideas. A farmer from Nzara County described his experience of growing up in a refugee camp in Uganda as key to his decision to begin farming vegetables. Ugandans already had experience of producing vegetable crops commercially. The man had acquired the necessary skills, such as the use of pesticides, via a friend he had met while living in Uganda. This knowledge set him apart from other local farmers in Nzara County. But not only did he utilise the skills himself, he also shared them with other local farmers, who had previously never used pesticides and were incurring regular heavy crop losses from pests.

Other personal accounts described exposure to ideas brought to the local area by those from different countries. For example, several stories mentioned interacting with those from DRC, Uganda or Sudan in local marketplaces. In some cases, this involved the transfer of knowledge of new types of products and processes, like the selling of salted fish in Bor Market (see case

2 We have used 'X' to protect the anonymity of interviewees.

study, Box 8). In other cases, individuals learned from others via the general observation of how people who had come from other countries conducted business, including selling techniques and customer care:

> If you go to the market today, you will see that there are lots of Ugandan men and women running different businesses. This has allowed local businesses' owners to observe and learn from how the Ugandans do business. For example, their ways of talking to clients, encouraging them to buy more. This is something which Ugandan business owners are good at, and something which local businesspeople are learning from. (Male elder, Nzara County)

The centrality of people in the accessing of ideas in South Sudan, meant that both social and business networks were key. Like others in Nzara County, a female farmer explained that she had decided to move towards mixed farming and rearing livestock. She described how she had got the idea from her neighbour who used to feed his goats on her land; she learned from what he was doing. She explained that she was looking to expand the livestock she kept to include pigs – again, learning from the experience of someone else in her village. Another personal account was that of a local businessman in Nzara County who had established a successful retail business, going on to build and run a hotel. Initially he learned from his mother, who used to sell alcohol. He gained experience from local traders during his time in the DRC and Uganda. Now he was transferring this knowledge to others:

> That's how we learn – by copying those who have gone before. Now I am doing the same. I've trained and helped to establish the businesses of three of my former employees. I've also given advice to those living in the same area as me. (Businessman, Nzara County)

Ethiopia and South Sudan offered an interesting comparison of how ideas travelled, particularly during times of conflict. In South Sudan, through displacement and fighting alongside other communities, people had been exposed to new ideas. In Mekelle, by contrast, the conflict and the blockade stifled the space to try something new. Those displaced into Mekelle who started new ventures relied on the skills and ideas they already had. Those who set up businesses, such as shops or restaurants, tended to report that this was a similar livelihood activity to one they had done before arriving in Mekelle.

One such individual was a 43-year-old male construction worker, originally from Zalambessa in eastern Tigray, who had been displaced to Mekelle. He had been displaced several times before arriving in Mekelle, and had been able to apply his skills at each move:

> In Zalambessa I used to produce bricks and sell it to both individuals constructing houses and construction companies…. I had previous experience of working in the construction sector as well… [in Mekelle] I had been labouring in both loading and unloading goods and construction, but in the last four months I have secured better paid work supervising the construction of my friend's house… if I can save enough money I plan to migrate back to Somaliland where there is a high demand for construction work…. I will buy a machine that produces bricks…. I have a profession and I can work and reestablish myself.

BOX 3. THE ROLE OF AID ACTORS IN THE SPREAD OF IDEAS

Outside influence was also seen in the transfer of knowledge from aid actors. More so in Nzara County, those connected to farming would mention the role NGOs had played in the fostering of improved farming methods and the encouragement of growing cash crops.

This transfer of knowledge also included skills, helping one woman establish a business selling soap in Bor County. Coming from a farming background, the woman described how people like her, who have been forced to abandon farming livelihoods due to conflict and flooding, can lack the skills to transition to non-farming livelihoods. She was selected to be part of a basic income-generating skills training programme, where she learned to make liquid soap. The woman described going on to sell her soap in a shop she rents in the local market, employing others to sell on her behalf in other locations and using a WhatsApp group to sell and advertise to customers.

The importance of people in the spread of ideas suggests that networks may be key to the transfer of knowledge. These include networks which NGOs have helped to establish. In Nzara County, farming cooperatives were referred to as a method of transferring knowledge between farmers and helping to avoid bad practices. Another example was the establishment of a savings club set up by a group of businesswomen working in retail in Nzara County. The lack of access to banking services meant that the women were seeking a solution that would both keep their money safe and provide a means to expand their businesses. With this initial idea in mind, the group turned to a local savings association for guidance.

Source: authors.

Understanding how ideas travel can broaden our understanding of how to support innovation and change. The role of people and networks demonstrates that not all solutions to support innovation and change are technical. If an individual belongs to a wide and diverse network, that individual has a wide net to fish for new ideas. Supporting innovation may therefore come in the form of connecting people to networks, to help in the transfer of knowledge, widen people's nets, and increase the spread of ideas.

IDP-run poultry farm in Mekelle, 2024. Creit: Fekadu A. Tufa

BOX 4. CASE STUDY: THE IMPORTANCE OF PEOPLE IN THE SPREAD OF IDEAS

Traditionally, Western Equatoria in South Sudan has been known for crop farming rather than the farming of livestock. However, as more people look for new opportunities to make money in South Sudan, new ways of farming have become appealing to farmers in Western Equatoria. A 45-year-old male pig farmer from Nzara County explains the background to his decision making:

> I have not moved away from the traditional livelihoods of farming crops. I have just decided to diversify to increase my income by taking advantage of an opportunity. In 2021, I sold my motorbike and bought four pigs, two boars and two sows in Wau and brought them here. In six months, I had over 60 pigs, mostly young ones. By 2023, I bought a motorbike, opened a poultry farm and now I am thinking about buying goats and cows.
>
> I was a soldier during the liberation. I lived among the Dinka and I saw how they profited from rearing animals. I learned from what they were doing.... We [people from Nzara County] were not open to new ideas which is why we don't have animals. We grew up being told that this is what we do, we don't do that and so on. Now, people like me who had the chance to travel and learn are taking advantage of new opportunities.
>
> The first time I brought pigs, some people laughed because they had never seen pigs before. But now people approach me and ask me to train them to keep pigs. This makes me happy. I want to see other people doing the same business as me.

Source: authors.

2.3 What are the enabling factors for change?

Financial resources

In the stories we heard, change was largely reliant on having access to financial resources. Those without such resources referred to it as a big constraint. However, although external support was occasionally mentioned, those we spoke to had primarily sought to generate their own capital or raise it via social and business networks.

In Mekelle, credit was a common way to raise initial capital to start a business. Women spoke of getting goods such as vegetables and grain on credit in order to turn a small initial profit or develop new business interests. As previously mentioned, this also included a woman creating her own informal credit system (see case study, Box 5). Sometimes women teamed up in order to obtain more vegetables on credit to sell. In Bor County, women also built their own business networks and used their collective buying power to buy, process and then transport salted fish (see case study, Box 8).

People within networks could also be key in the transfer of economic resources, highlighting the importance of social capital. For example, one IDP man in Mekelle described how his brother was able to help him access a loan:

> I tried to get a microfinance loan, but I did not have any collateral and my ID card was from Adama and I'm still without any local ID.... Thankfully, my brother stepped in and was able to secure the loan using his civil service ID card.

Others were able to sell one kind of asset to buy another (e.g. the man who sold a motorbike to buy pigs (case study, Box 4) or used the profits from one business venture to reinvest in a new idea. The decision to sell to invest is an example of people shifting between livelihood activities in order to navigate shocks and take advantage of new opportunities. In Mekelle, a crop farmer spoke of recurrent shocks – locusts, conflict and then drought – which had forced him to sell his taxi to invest in livestock and then to move out of agriculture altogether. In South Sudan, one farmer spoke of transitioning from growing vegetables to moving into cattle trading; then, when flooding disrupted the livestock trade, he had to shift again into retail trading to find a more reliable revenue stream.

Particularly in South Sudan, the decision to reinvest was not always about navigating shocks; sometimes it was an active decision to use their capital to find new ways of making a profit. The path from one activity to another was sometimes planned in advance. This was the case when individuals used illicit activities for a short time to save up enough money to move into legal ways of making money. As previously mentioned, one man in Nzara County was involved in smuggling goods between South Sudan and DRC, with the ultimate aim of making enough money to buy a tractor and focus on farming.

BOX 5. CASE STUDY: CREATING INFORMAL CREDIT SYSTEMS

Credit was a common strategy used to buy and sell goods. However, one female trader used the credit system not only to buy goods to sell, but also to lend to others, creating an informal lending system.

X had been living in Mekelle for six years after being displaced from Awi, in the Amhara region south of Tigray. In Mekelle she runs a roadside kiosk, selling food and drinks like coffee and beer:

> I mainly get my basic ingredients on credit from other traders. For example, I get milk daily on credit and pay the traders back at the end of the day. I will also get flour on credit and pay what I owe at the end of the week when I've used it all.
>
> It would be hard to do business without these credit arrangements with traders, as there is not a formal credit system to borrow money from to buy goods.
>
> There is a car garage close to my kiosk where workers come from to buy food and beer from me on credit. It is not without its risks. Some customers fail to pay me on time and others disappear and fail to pay me back altogether. But this way of doing business is part of daily life here. Selling food and drink on credit has helped me attract more customers. Without offering the credit system, people would simply go elsewhere.

Source: authors.

Having confidence to take risks

Having access to capital doesn't necessarily mean people are more likely to be entrepreneurial; it also comes down to an individual being willing to take an idea forward. Some individuals have the personal characteristics needed to drive them to undertake change while others may not be willing or feel able to take that leap.

Sometimes people are willing to take multiple risks in the expectation that it will pay off. One such case was a mobile money and airtime service provider in Nzara County. The man noticed a gap in the market for charging mobile phones. He then responded to the demand of his customers by also selling airtime, and from there he decided to register as a mobile money agent. His first attempt to move into this market failed when the mobile banking provider ceased trading, and he lost the money he had saved. However, he took the risk of trying again with another provider, building his capital gradually with the provider until he was certain they were reliable.

Some individuals can give the initial impression that they are driven by the risk itself. Personal history can help us understand what sets individuals apart when it comes to their willingness take risks. A vegetable farmer turned cattle trader from Bor County painted a picture of his decision making as one of an 'adventure' and the need to take risks in order to succeed. One such risk was his decision to enter the cattle trade. He described how, when transporting cattle between Bor County and Juba, they would have to carry weapons in order to protect themselves from cattle raids. He explained that due to these known risks his relatives were reluctant for him to enter the trade – but, given the money he could earn, he was not put off.

This man was not necessarily a 'natural-born' risk taker; rather, he became one out of necessity, and from there his ambition grew. The initial drive to begin as a vegetable farmer was not the result of a natural taste for adventure, but the need to provide for his parents and siblings. This built his confidence, and seeing others making more money in the cattle trade then pushed him to take a further leap.

Another example of life experience which nurtured an element of risk taking was that of a displaced female restaurant owner in Mekelle. She described how she had built her business, first selling fruit, then coffee and tea, and eventually opening the restaurant she owns today, where she employed one person and was looking to modernise the menu. When arriving in Mekelle, her position was precarious: she was raising her children alone as her husband had left her and, like other IDPs, she was struggling to survive. However, the decision to start and expand her business interests meant that she was now in a better position than other IDPs. Her life history revealed that she had been orphaned young and had to take care of her siblings, meaning that she needed to be self-reliant and rise to challenges from an early age in order to survive.

Bor County fish market, South Sudan. Credit: Abraham Ding Akoi

Undertaking change often means being the first to try something, which has the potential to open a person up to ridicule and scepticism (see case studies, Boxes 4 and 6). This means that taking risks requires a certain level of self-confidence. One example is a farmer in Nzara County who decided to expand the size of his farm. He noticed that the markets were changing and people were buying different types of goods, so he decided to buy more land and split this between growing staple and cash crops, a decision which was initially met with derision from his peers:

> [First], I went to the chiefs and county authorities to buy the land. At the time, people thought I was crazy or just being greedy, but I was being strategic…. I made a decision that made people laugh at me… the chiefs joked that they were happy to give the land to someone who wanted to feed South Sudan. The County and State authorities said the same thing. They gave me the documents thinking it was a joke. But now I have the documents and the reality is here, they are praising me.

The reference to praise suggests another important aspect of risk taking – having confidence in one's decision making. Even those who were prepared to go against the grain (see case studies, Boxes 4 and 6) sought some form of validation of their decision.

Other personal stories suggest that networks can be an important way build confidence:

> The experiences I heard from other women who had been successful eased my fears. So when I heard about the liquid soap training being offered, I took courage from these women's stories to believe that this is something I could do and that would offer a better source of income for my family. (Businesswoman, Bor County)

Belonging to networks can also help to provide the initial resources and manage the risk associated with innovation and change. In both Ethiopia and South Sudan, women spoke of forming networks in order to buy goods to sell (see above and case study, Box 8).

If a willingness to take risks is thought of as a potential barrier dependent on confidence, then change can be facilitated either through raising people's confidence, including their risk appetites, or by lowering the risks which they may face. Both strategies could give them enough confidence to undertake change. Some of the people we spoke to had overcome confidence barriers by using networks. These had a double benefit: increasing people's confidence – because people gave each other confidence – but also reducing the confidence needed in the first place, as the risk was shared, which reduced the risk burden of the individual. This strategy could be widely adopted by those seeking to promote entrepreneurialism and risk taking.

BOX 6. CASE STUDY: GOING AGAINST THE GRAIN

In Nzara County, X was forced to drop out of school after falling pregnant and being left by the father to take care of the child alone. Initially, she tried to make ends meet by brewing alcohol and frying doughnuts. She saw that motor-taxi riders earned far more than she could, and decided to become a motor-taxi rider herself, despite this being a male-dominated industry:

> I started by taxiing people around the community and to the market…. At first people laughed at me. I received so many questions and a lot of laughter. The stereotypes about women being incapable are deeply rooted in this society. My fellow women also challenged me. So, on the first day, I only managed to carry a few passengers. But I started to observe how the men attract customers… they are always looking around and rushing to individuals whom they see looking for a ride. So, I learned to be proactive, to keep the motorcycle clean… to attract customers….
>
> Being the only woman working among men is so challenging… they spend much of their time making jokes at my expense. I don't take it personally otherwise it could ruin my goal….
>
> It has turned out to be a good decision. I have made a lot of money…. Currently, I have over 100 regular women customers, who call me whenever they want to go to the market or other places…. I created a WhatsApp group for them to request a ride directly….
>
> What made me more successful was the fact that I became a talking point almost everywhere, which made me famous. Even people who didn't know me began to like me and they became my customers to support me… this encouraged me to continue doing this. What I don't like hearing from my community is a comment like, 'She rides a motorbike like a man', or 'She is strong like a man'. I always challenge those who say that because it makes me feel as though I need to be a man to achieve what I have….

Source: authors.

Innovation and change are partly products of their environment

Despite the different contexts of South Sudan and Ethiopia, there were similarities in the types of barriers people faced in terms of poor infrastructure and services. These barriers do not necessarily hinder people's willingness to undertake change, as people will try to plug gaps where possible. However, certain gaps may prove to be beyond what is feasible for an individual to bridge. For example, during the blockade in Mekelle the mobile network was cut off, meaning that locals couldn't connect with the diaspora community and did not have access to mobile money transfers. Instead, money had to be smuggled in.

Some of the barriers faced by people trying to undertake change can appear quite mundane, but are nonetheless just as critical. In Mekelle, IDPs lacked the basics such as access to bank accounts, documentation to access capital (as in the example above) and guarantors to access jobs. In South Sudan, people had been put off exporting food items such as dried fish to diaspora communities in Australia and Canada because of a lack of understanding of the export procedures required. This last barrier is effectively an administrative choice.

The ability to undertake change can come from a position of relative privilege, in which networks often play a role. The previous example of the man using his brother's position within the civil service to secure a loan demonstrates the importance of social capital. In South Sudan, a former employee of an international aid organisation described being able to gain contacts and information from networks within the aid organisation to start up a transportation business, which included providing services to the same aid organisation. These opportunities weren't open to everyone. This, too, is an important lens for external agencies to adopt: change and agency can be promoted by understanding how these kinds of privilege play a role and by extending such opportunities to more people.

But beyond individual stories of relative privilege, more broadly in Mekelle the varying levels of access to established networks were apparent when comparing the fortunes of IDPs. Those who had been living longer in Mekelle had more success in re-establishing their livelihoods in Mekelle. This could partly be explained by location and being better connected to the host communities and existing trading networks. In a context where personal stories mentioned the importance of guarantors for jobs and trading relationships built on credit and trust, connections were key. Those who had arrived in Mekelle prior to 2020 had not simply been there longer but had also been living among host communities, which facilitated better business and trading opportunities compared to those who had arrived in Mekelle after 2020. This latter group tended to live in IDP centres or the Seba Kare IDP camp on the outskirts of Mekelle (Sturridge and Tufa, 2024).

A big difference between the case study areas was that the undercurrent of change that was apparent from our interviews in South Sudan was not present in Ethiopia. In part this is due to economic and security issues. The blockade in Mekelle had a big impact on the spending power of both IDPs and host communities. In addition to the economic shock of the blockade, Mekelle had also been hit by locusts and drought, which had a negative impact on the farming sector. The local economy was starved of capital, which ultimately led to businesses struggling and collapsing. People would try to open businesses such as tea shops and restaurants, but there was a lack of money around for people to spend in these businesses. The experience of Mekelle demonstrated the importance of having a local economy which generates economic demand and purchasing power, which provides the environment that enables ideas to grow. However, this is only part of the story. Social factors – shaped by, but distinct from, economic and security issues – have also played their role. In Mekelle, beyond financial reasons, trauma and poor living conditions have resulted in people lacking the 'energy' to innovate and change. ('Energy' here is meant as the combination of time, physical and mental energy needed to create the ability to take a risk and a belief in what is worth attempting.)

In a context of conflict and displacement such as Mekelle, where so much is in flux, there is a fine line between success and failure. But even when people did possess the drive to take risks to undertake change or improve their situation, attempts would often meet with repeated setbacks. For example, a 43-year-old man described how in 2022 after 18 months of being displaced he decided to use his savings and invest with a group of friends in some land for cultivation. The land was owned by the state, which meant entering into an agreement whereby they would share half the profits with the government. However, after cultivating the land, fighting broke out again in October 2022, forcing them to return to Mekelle. Later they returned to find that their land and crops had been destroyed. The group tried again to cultivate the land, only for the crops to be destroyed by drought. Stories like this show that risky environments may not necessarily dissuade some people from trying, but the environment may determine the extent to which people can successfully achieve change.

BOX 7. CASE STUDY: MOVING SIDEWAYS TO MOVE FORWARD

In contexts affected by conflict and recurrent crises, dynamic livelihoods and change are not always positive steps forward. In this context, people may simply fall back on what they know to be effective. This type of change might represent a sideways step, but it can help people stabilise their lives in the hope of bouncing back in the future:

X was a 46-year-old taxi driver from Adama, Oromia, who was displaced to Mekelle in 2020 just before the outbreak of war. He moved with his family and sold his taxi, deciding to invest in poultry farming. However, the context meant the man's livelihood was often precarious. The war and blockade meant that inputs could be expensive and difficult to get hold of, forcing him to switch between different farming activities, to the extent that he eventually ceased farming. Though at one stage he ran out of money, he was able to secure a loan through his brother (see section 2.3) which enabled him to buy another taxi. This provided him with a steady income, enough to pay rent and school fees and to restart his poultry farming business.

The man still held ambitions to expand the poultry farm and rent more land to cultivate cereal. However, high input costs meant that this was not possible. Reflecting on whether the changes he undertook have been positive, he had the following to say:

> I say it is positive. Not because I'm satisfied with the changes. I could have changed much better had it not been for the war and blockade, which made most of my business activities difficult to pursue. I say my changes are positive by comparing myself with my other IDP friends who are suffering a lot.

Source: authors.

Not just new ideas, but new ways of thinking

In South Sudan, personal accounts demonstrated an openness to what was possible when it came to their livelihoods. Nzara County had been exposed to foreign industries such as cotton and coffee via the colonial authorities and the arrival of an Arab community, but these had never translated into new opportunities for local people. This become self-reinforcing: they were seen as the preserve of others rather than as potential opportunities for local people. But today, external ideas – such as growing coffee or rearing livestock – are no longer viewed as ideas for others, but business opportunities for local entrepreneurs to invest in and make money from. Those living in Nzara County reflected on the changes they were witnessing within the business community:

> There have been lots of changes in the business sector. The shops in the town used to belong to Arabs, and very few shops belonged to the local people. But now, almost

all the shops belong to locals. The few Darfurians and Ethiopians present in this community rent shops from the locals. (Community elder, Nzara County)

[I]f you ask my father about coffee, he will tell you about how he drank at the Arab stalls in the market but not how to farm it. Today, I grow five hectares of coffee and everyone else has a coffee farm because there is a market and it brings money. (Farmer and businessman, Nzara County)

In both Nzara and Bor County, the undercurrent of change was evident as a shift in mentality in relation to the function of livelihoods. People we interviewed were no longer producing just for consumption, but to sell and make a profit – and, where possible, reinvest profits into the next opportunity. Business and production within traditional livelihoods such as farming and fishing were not just focused on expansion within domestic markets but also foreign markets, including exporting items such as dried fish and okra to diaspora communities in Australia and Canada.

Two common reasons were cited for this shift in people's outlooks. First, conflict and displacement had exposed people to new cultures and ideas and these were now being brought back to South Sudan. Second, a growing market economy in South Sudan has meant that people need to earn money in order to afford the basics in life.

But the need to make money wasn't the only story. Many of those we spoke to also indicated growing aspirations: people see individuals making money and think 'I want what they've got'. People in Bor and Nzara County spoke of the importance of having the edge over their competitors. Part of this includes the emergence of a 'customer is king' mentality, with individuals discussing the need to prioritise the needs of customers to beat the competition. This included responding to new customer demands and purchasing behaviours through add-ons such as home delivery services, and also building trust and delivering a quality service to maintain a loyal customer base.

Coffee plantations from Nzara County, South Sudan.
Credit: Abraham Ding Akoi

There is still a willingness to share knowledge and ideas with others, but there were also examples of more individualistic thinking in terms of sharing in activities as a risk to profits. Despite a willingness of others to work as part of farming cooperatives, a 40-year-old farmer from Nzara County who farmed cash crops such as teak and coffee, rejected the idea:

> I refused to join the cooperative groups because I wanted to be independent. I didn't want to engage in activities where people would work together.... [I]f I made a profit; it is mine and mine alone.

The story of women in South Sudan is a big part of this openness to new ways of considering what is possible. Today women are at the centre of business activities within the local markets (see case study, Box 8). Women interviewees referred to the way the experience of conflict and the emergence of a market economy have combined to contribute to a growing acceptance of women engaging in money-making activities:

> [W]omen are no longer just housewives; they are breadwinners in their families. Many women have learned from the experiences in the internal displaced camps, in the refugee camps, they have interacted with other people.... Others like me who were born into the traditional setting where men are everything just woke up to reality when the men were gone. I never imagined I would be doing this, I always assumed I would be in the cattle camp with my family. Now, if you give me one hundred cows and ask me to go back, I would refuse because the life is here, making money. (Businesswoman, Bor County)

> This has something to do with exposure to other cultures in different countries. For example, many have been in Uganda, Kenya and Sudan, not to mention the population that went to the USA, Australia, Canada and Europe. People have learned the importance of engaging in activities that generate income... [t]he situation of our country has also contributed. Widows of the war of liberation have engaged in business to take care of their children. This has encouraged other women whose husbands have no sources of incomes to join markets. (Businesswoman, Bor County)

One focus group discussion with male farmers shows how the growing need for money in South Sudan was forcing them to rethink not only their own livelihood choices, but also their increasing openness to their wives going out and engaging in money-making activities:

> We must not only focus on cattle. We also need to engage in other sources of income such as those in the markets. My wife sells milk in the markets along with other small business activities. This is something that my father didn't appreciate because according to him it is against the culture [for women to be working in the market], but I told him it is my decision. We need to encourage our women to do business. Five years ago, I would not have accepted this. But after engaging with the UN and NGOs programmes I understand the importance of work. (Farmer, Bor County)

> Life is about change. What my grandfather was doing during his time is not what my father is doing. During my grandfather's time they never understood the value of money. The same applies to my father. But I recognise these changes, that is why I want my wife to work to earn money. (Farmer, Bor County)

This change is not accepted by all and not available to all women in South Sudan. Some women spoke of facing abuse and described men trying to take advantage in markets, as well as husbands who did not support their wives working in markets. Women can face accusations of adultery for interacting with men in the marketplace, as well as a societal belief that women should be at home looking after their children. Ultimately such factors can put some women off entering business. The woman in a previous example, who had established a successful direct-to-customer soap delivery service, spoke of how such stigmatisations have put her at a disadvantage in her other business venture (selling second-hand clothes in the market) when compared with her Ugandan female competitors. Ugandan women don't face the same stigmatisation, allowing them to move freely around the market selling clothes, whilst she must wait for customers to come to her.

But the women's stories we heard highlight the fact that while context can set the parameters with which individuals have to contend, context and individual agency do not act in isolation of one another. The changing role of women is not accepted by everyone. But the personal accounts above, and in the case studies in Boxes 6 and 8, show that gender norms are changing. While the context and circumstances of such changes are important, they also need to be driven by individuals, and this takes particular individual characteristics. The example being set by a few can lay a path for others to more easily follow. Here again social networks can play a role, lowering the confidence barrier by raising confidence levels.

BOX 8. CASE STUDY: BUSINESSWOMEN AT THE HEART OF GROWING SECTORS

Historically, salting fish had not been common in South Sudan. South Sudanese women first got the idea through interacting with women from Uganda and the DRC who were selling salted fish in the market in Bor County. One group had teamed up and now work as brokers within the salted fish business in Bor County. The women buy fish from Toich, process and package it, then export it to Uganda and the DRC. The women have become an important link connecting fisherman in Toich, who don't have the time to process and package fish, to markets in Uganda and DRC:

> In Toich, I met these hard-working women and we became a team. We were new to the business and all facing the same challenge of providing for our families. So, we decided to team up, pool our resources together and started buying fish. We would then salt it, dry it, transport to Bor from Toich, package it and then transport to Uganda and DRC where other brokers will buy it and resell it. The reason we decided to team up was just a business strategy. It allows us to buy and transport more fish which gives us opportunity to sell more.

The women acknowledged that, as widows, they do not face the same restrictions as married women and people are generally supportive given their circumstances. But these women see this advantage as a vanguard for all women to break into the market. They believe their success is normalising the presence of women in the marketplace and provides a signal to men that women can excel in business. The women believe that society is opening up, and the growing need for families to earn money means that men have little choice but to accept their wives engaging in business activities.

Source: authors.

3 CONCLUSIONS: WHAT PEOPLE'S STORIES TELL US ABOUT DYNAMIC LIVELIHOODS AND CHANGE

Livelihoods are dynamic and we need to see them that way. Despite the evidence that livelihoods in conflicts and crises are dynamic (e.g. Gunasekara, 2020), few aid programmes assess livelihood change. This report's stories of livelihood diversification and the ability to learn new skills or transfer old skills to new locations demonstrate that people do not sit easily within static livelihood groups (e.g. rural vs urban). Personal accounts included those who were always pursuing the next thing to invest in – not sitting around waiting for handouts or looking to be 'saved'. Even when decisions to make a change were forced or under pressure, people looked to diversify or transition, in order to find a livelihood activity which worked for that person at that time. Seeing livelihoods through the lens of change and dynamism opens up different possibilities for supporting people.

Context, context, context. In our three case study areas, people faced different barriers. Different contexts made different economic opportunities available (or unavailable) and they shaped different mindsets and attitudes. Different contexts change how much room for manoeuvre people have, resulting in a different risk horizon and appetite for being creative with their livelihood choices. In some cases, people may be looking to grow their livelihoods, whereas in other contexts they might be trying whatever they can just to get by.

The implication is that a good understanding of specific local constraints is needed to help people's livelihood creativity. The importance of understanding context is a widely acknowledged fact. However, support for innovation and livelihoods in general has been criticised for too often reflecting external design, rather than the needs and interests of those it is looking to support (Hoffman and Lange, 2016; Pain and Levine, 2024; CLIP and I&M, 2025; Düchting, 2025). Thinking through ways to support change requires asking people what changes they are already making, and what they are hoping to achieve. It can create a clearer picture of how to harness change potential if what you're trying to change matches the risk horizons you're trying to support. Programming won't be able to do the same thing everywhere. This creates a challenge, because working at scale and designing context-specific programming creates a constant tension. However, it is a challenge that must be confronted if support for change is to be effective.

There is more to supporting livelihoods than skills and money. Ensuring that people have access to capital and skills is, of course, important, but it is neither enough nor even the only possible strategy for supporting livelihood creativity. As our stories showed, for most people finding skills was not the first barrier. Those who undertook change were happy to go out and acquire new skills if needed. When it came to financial resources, individuals found ways of accessing these where needed. Looking at supporting dynamism and change in different ways, such as by promoting networks, may unlock entry points which go beyond technical inputs and which could be more effective and undertaken at greater scale. Considering that contexts affected by fragility and conflict are dynamic, so too are people's livelihoods, demanding new skills or the transfer of existing ones. Supporting ways that allow people to be flexible could be more sustainable because they work to increase people's agency and adaptability in face of uncertainty.

Other research has highlighted the importance of networks, and the forming of new networks, in supporting households during crisis (Krystalli et al., 2019). Our stories from Ethiopia also showed how the formation of new networks helped IDPs enter the job market in Mekelle. What we also saw, particularly in South Sudan, was that networks can be a source of new opportunities. Social, business and even networks which NGOs had helped to support played a role in transferring knowledge and ideas. People got ideas from others and people were willing to share their experience and knowledge. People within networks also facilitated the transfer of financial resources and were job creators. These all add value to the local economy, supporting individuals during a crisis and those looking to get ahead when the context allows. Supporting dynamism and change could look to identify these networks and connect others to them.

Work to reduce entry barriers to dynamism and change. This means working at two levels. First, address barriers that act as a constraint within the wider environment. Contextual factors which are beyond the individual can set the limits of what is possible when it comes to livelihood creativity. Infrastructure and access to finance were some of the main examples people gave when thinking of barriers preventing them from undertaking change. But unlocking barriers which support agency may require less investment than we think. As we have highlighted, often the barriers people face appear quite mundane. Often, too, change isn't big and flashy; sometimes people are just looking for what works at that point in time. In times of crises, the emergence of new social networks was key in contexts where family support networks had broken down and where IDPs were outsiders in the local job market. For others it was simply about transferring previous skills and falling back on what worked. These solutions may not be 'exciting', but excitement is not necessarily what people are looking for.

The second set of barriers to address exist at the individual level. This is not necessarily separate from wider context. As we saw from the comparative examples of Ethiopia and South Sudan, context will help to set the risk horizon within which people are able to operate. But even in risky environments, there were those who were still willing to undertake change. In contexts where boundaries were set by societal norms, people were willing to push against this. A personal willingness to take risks was key. We should therefore ask: what else helps to raise individuals' risk appetite? And what can be done to help manage these risks and lower the entry barrier for them to undertake change? How can a level playing field be created, so that opportunities are open to all and not just those with the right connections? This comes back to the importance of people and networks. Again, an entry point could be created through connecting people to these networks in order to build confidence and create a sense of safety in numbers when it comes to the risks associated with innovation and change.

Supporting a culture of change. One of the big finds of the research was in South Sudan, where there was an openness to new ways of considering what is possible. People we interviewed were actively seeking new ways of making money to meet basic needs but were also driven by new aspirations. Through livelihoods, people were challenging previously accepted societal expectations. People were influenced by external ideas, including those of international agencies. This kind of transformation takes time, but if ways of supporting such cultural change can be found, it would appear to be a highly effective, sustainable and cost-effective way of approaching livelihood support.

Don't be more gender-conservative than women themselves. Women were a big part of this change in South Sudan, breaking down a conservative culture by entering the business environment. There may be a reluctance to push certain cultural ideals if they appear as a foreign imposition. But women we interviewed were not looking around and thinking this wasn't their place. Instead, those who could saw an opportunity. These women can act as a vanguard for wider change. It demonstrates that change does happen at a societal level and support for livelihoods should look to contribute to this. Here, the role of networks can again be key. Women interviewed spoke of learning from other women, gaining confidence from other women succeeding, and forming female business networks which achieved scale. Support for this could be achieved by connecting women to wider networks, indirectly promoting women's visibility and women's leadership. This could also involve identifying women who do not face the same barriers as others (e.g. widows) or those willing to 'go against the grain', to identify where the next change is coming from. The examples of women challenging social norms demonstrate that context and individual agency are a two-way process, and we should not assume that either works on its own.

IDP camp in Mekelle, 2024. Credit: Fekadu A. Tufa

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Cover image: Fish Market in Bor, Jonglei state, South Sudan. Credit: Elphas Ngugi/SPARC

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