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Policy brief

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The violent stability of the war economy on the Darfur–South Sudan border

Joseph Diing Majok and Nicki Kindersley

Introduction

Even in the face of war, mass displacement and food crises, some borderlands remain remarkably stable, seemingly unaffected by 'spillover' from nearby conflicts. Why does this phenomenon occur in some areas, but not others? More fundamentally, what exactly makes a border area 'stable' in the first place?

The South Sudan–Sudan border is one such place where political authority has remained relatively stable on both sides despite successive civil wars and refugee crises. Here, markets, migrant work and the prevailing political order have seen little change over the past decade, especially along South Sudan's western borderlands with Darfur. How can this stability be explained against a backdrop of ongoing civil war in Sudan, not to mention regional economic and political collapse?

This policy brief explores the forces contributing to the apparent stability in South Sudan's Northern Bahr el-Ghazal state, drawing on interviews conducted in the border area near Darfur.[1] Three key dynamics emerged from the research:

- A consistent set of military entrepreneurs maintains control over tax, trade routes and markets, enforcing (violent) daily order.[2]
- A sharply unequal society is sustained by the economic and social capital wielded by this group, with the majority of people left vulnerable to rent extraction, growing debt and precarious cash labour.
- Beyond the threat and use of violence, political order is maintained by elite patronage and demonstrations of social responsibility, including the provision of clean water, emergency charity, healing, and jobs in elite-controlled arenas.

Together, these dynamics point to how fluctuations in political order may ultimately catalyse instability, even violent conflict, in what at first glance appears to be a stable system.

1 This policy brief, which forms part of the XCEPT Contested Borderland Elite Trajectories (CBET) project, draws on 30 interviews conducted in the South Sudan–Sudan borderland during late 2025 and early 2026, supplemented by aid sector archive research.

2 M. Santschi and G. Frerks, 'The disappearance of intra-communal violence as a legacy of SPLM/A rebel governance in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, South Sudan', *Civil Wars* 27: 1, 2024, pp. 1–25; J. Majok, *War and the borderland: Northern Bahr el-Ghazal during the Sudan conflict* (Rift Valley Institute, 2024).

The borderland war economy in practice

In many cases, cycles of war and peace allow national and local elites, including military entrepreneurs, to build private commercial empires on both sides of a border. In the Darfur–South Sudan borderlands, the end of the second Sudanese civil war in 2005 precipitated a rapid influx of returnees. The accompanying expansion of markets swelled the tax revenues flowing to local governing authorities and well-connected army commanders. Diverted humanitarian assistance, intended for returnees and postwar recovery and reconstruction, added yet more revenue.[3] Moreover, the ranks of previously displaced people seeking work provided a cheap labour force, facilitating the rise of commercial farming. This in turn generated fresh investment opportunities and rents for those with capital, including dollar-paid aid workers and diaspora residents.[4] The result was an ever-intensifying social stratification.

Any prospect of trickle-down benefits arising from this marketisation boom evaporated with the December 2013 outbreak of civil war in South Sudan. By 2015, the country was wracked by economic collapse and hyperinflation.[5] Renewed conflict in 2016 drove massive military recruitment, stripping poorer families of wage earners. Matters worsened further when a series of severe droughts and floods in 2016–17 tipped the Darfur borderlands into famine. The new class of political and economic elites, seeing their incomes hit by inflation, climate shocks, political reconfigurations at the centre, and reductions in development aid, shifted towards more predatory, exploitative practices. These included increased taxation, as well as accelerated land accumulation for both residential and commercial purposes.[6]

Since then, the controllers of trade networks have sought to fix the market prices for food and fuel; military and government departments have not only established widespread roadblocks, but have also imposed various new fines and taxes on trade and market work;[7] interest rates for loans and sharecropping have tripled; and the corruption engulfing surveying and titling processes has led to many poorer residents losing the rights to their farms. Enclosure (of land and resources) and extraction (of rents, debt repayments and cheap labour) by these controlling authorities continue to generate opportunities for (re)investment, perpetuating the borderland monopoly.

Balancing threats of violence with marginal social goods

These burdens fall heavily on ordinary residents, especially those without access to land, familial cattle wealth or other means of weathering crises. Despite decades of abuse and exploitation at the hands of the state, people still expect some degree of protection, care, employment opportunities and other basic livelihood services. As a junior civil servant explained, both public goods and corruption are understood as ‘trickle down, and that makes it difficult to organise and resist’.[8]

Nevertheless, two factors hold the potential to undermine the status quo, along with the relative stability it sustains: firstly, competition for power among militarised entrepreneurs and, secondly, uprisings against them from below. In terms of the latter, the obvious explanation for why people currently fail to rise up is that borderland governance is maintained by a monopoly on violence, as well as possible avenues for redress such as the police, judiciary and customary court systems. As one interviewee emphasised: ‘the threat of being killed or arrested has always made people afraid, and hence allowed the elites in government to control and dominate’.[9] In the absence of overt resistance, residents point to out-migration and a refusal to organise welcome delegations for visiting authorities as expressions of dissatisfaction.[10]

3 Interview with a veteran SPLA soldier, Maper West, 28 December 2025.

4 N. Kindersley and J. P. Majok, *Monetized livelihoods and militarized labour in South Sudan’s borderlands* (Rift Valley Institute, 2019).

5 UNDP, *Weekly media economic digest South Sudan: 28th Jul.-12th Aug. 2016* (2016).

6 P. Schouten, K. Matthysen and T. Muller, *Checkpoint economy: the political economy of checkpoints in South Sudan, ten years after independence* (IPIS/DIIS, 2021). See also N. Kindersley and J. P. Majok, *Breaking Out of the Borderlands: understanding migrant pathways from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan* (Rift Valley Institute, 2020).

7 N. Kindersley et al., *Updated political economy report on South Sudan – prepared for the Republic of Ireland in South Sudan* (Rift Valley Institute, unpublished [2025]).

8 Interview with junior local government official, Gok Machar market, 13 January 2026.

9 Interview with a peace committee member, Wanyjok, 4 February 2026.

10 Interview with a builder and church worker, Apada, 29 December 2025; interview with a teacher, Malou Aweer, 27 December 2025.

The threat of violence is not, however, the only means elites have at their disposal when exerting control over local populations. In the absence of a functional welfare state, the provision of very limited social goods offers a cheap way of demonstrating paternalist responsibility. Wealthy farm-owners, commercial and military entrepreneurs and state authorities alike have tried to position themselves as not only indispensable intermediaries between communities, armed actors, markets and the state, but also as careful custodians of local resources.[11] Extreme levels of poverty and a collapsed social contract with the state allow these limited acts of care to function as (bare minimum) welfare provision. Some large commercial farm-owners 'drill bore holes on their farms and allow members of the communities to drink from them, and so many members of the community even think they have gotten a lot'.[12] A builder and church worker in an Aweil suburb observed that poverty makes it 'easy to be bribed'.[13]

The provision of welfare services has provoked competition among wealthy monopolists keen to demonstrate they are more responsive to local needs than their rivals. Upon being appointed Vice-President in 2020, Hussein Abdel Bagi sought to paint himself as a champion of borderland peace in a bid to legitimise his financial accumulation and monopoly on the borderland state apparatus.[14] This included several tours across Northern Bahr el-Ghazal during which he made large cash donations and claimed leadership of the national and local peace committees mediating an end to various intercommunal and cross-border conflicts.[15]

Among other activities, Hussein tasked the committees with reconciling communities, reopening trade routes and coordinating payments for blood compensations.[16] At the same time, however, he took steps to neutralise local chiefs and youth leaders standing in the way of his mining, quarrying and land privatisation projects in these areas.[17] As one interviewee described it: 'every time a new commissioner or governor is appointed, he always identifies and recruits youths who can talk and write and employ them as his mouthpiece to fight fellow youths who demand for change. He does the same thing to chiefs'.[18]

The monopoly borderland: stable for whom?

Stability in the South Sudan–Sudan borderland is not the result of strong institutions or stable bargains between military–commercial elites. Rather, it is maintained by monopolisation, the use of violence, and the marginal provision of social goods through binding patronage networks. An ex-Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) combatant turned teacher summed up the situation as follows: 'If you reject them, you can't get food. If you talk about them, they pay someone as poor as you to fight you. If you praise them and work for them, they can feed you. That is our relationship'.[19]

In this way, elite extraction balanced with patronage and welfare have managed to sustain relative stability in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal amid turmoil across the border. While some might argue for the benefits of this stability, it raises two crucial questions that policymakers would do well to bear in mind when considering how best to respond to conflict:

- Firstly, in averting conflict spillover, whose stability is being prioritised? Although the coercive and opportunistic practices of local elites may forestall violence, they often come at the cost of the broader population's livelihoods and rights, potentially masking longer-term threats to stability.

- Secondly, which actors are, in reality, setting the terms of local labour systems, land rights and the provision of social goods? This borderland's

11 N. Kindersley, *Politics, power and chiefship in famine and war: a study of the former Northern Bahr el Ghazal State, South Sudan* (Rift Valley Institute, 2018).

12 Interview with elder, Aroyo town, 10 February 2026.

13 Interview with builder and church worker, Apada, 29 December 2025.

14 Rift Valley Institute, *South Sudan: Hussein Abdel Bagi deepens his control of the borderland* (December 2020).

15 A. Hawari, 'Death toll rises to 24 in Messeriya attacks in Aweil', Eye Radio, pub. online 6 January 2022. On Ngok–Twic Dinka conflict, see J. Craze, (2023) *Attacked from both sides: Abyei's existential dilemma* (HSBA/Small Arms Survey, July 2023).

16 Rift Valley Institute, *South Sudan: Hussein Abdel Bagi*. See also Deng John, 'VP Abdelbagi calls for an end to Twic-Ngok clashes', The Radio Community, pub. online 9 January 2023; A. Hawari, 'Juba offers Khartoum $200,000 for 10 Messeriya tribesmen killed by Dinka Malual in 2019', Eye Radio, pub. online 20 November 2020.

17 CSRF, 'Aweil Centre'. See also Radio Tamazuj, '21 Aweil chiefs after opposing land annexation plan – community leader', pub. online 24 March 2021; Aweil News Agency, 'NSS arrested five people over disposed NGO assets', Facebook post, pub. online 6 September 2023.

18 Interview with a former aid worker, Nyamlel, 14 January 2026.

19 Interview with teacher and ex-SPLA combatant, Malou Aweer, 27 December 2025.

> stability is partly due to its tightly controlled extractive market economy that undermines the poor majority's ability to build resilience and weather shocks, while its authoritarian and violent governance closes down possibilities for demanding fair work and social responsibility. Understanding these dynamics is also crucial to understanding how resources are being distributed, including via aid diversion.

Ultimately, the challenge is one of determining how local communities demanding fairer systems and accountability can best be supported to push for change in the face of a stability maintained by elite violence and exploitation.

About the authors

Joseph Diing Majok is a current PhD student in African Studies, University of Edinburgh, and a long-time research consultant with the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) in South Sudan. He has contributed to numerous research projects, including XCEPT, where he was a member of the Local Research Network (LRN). Through XCEPT, Majok has co-authored and independently written several reports, blogs and policy briefings on cross-border labour migration, militarisation and livelihood transitions.

Nicki Kindersley is a contemporary historian of migration and work, focused on South Sudan and its borderlands. She is Senior Lecturer in African History at Cardiff University and the author of *New Sudans: Wartime intellectual histories in Khartoum* (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

About this project

This brief is part of the XCEPT project 'Contested Borderland Elite Trajectories' (CBET), which explores how political and economic elites shape authority, resource extraction, governance and everyday life in contested borderlands. Empirical research focuses on three case studies representing distinct borderland configurations: Northern Bahr el-Ghazal (South Sudan); North and South Waziristan (Pakistan); and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

About XCEPT

This publication is issued by the Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) research programme, funded by UK International Development. XCEPT brings together world-leading experts and local researchers to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the drivers of violent and peaceful behaviour, to inform policies and programmes that support peace. For more information, visit www.xcept-research.org or contact us at info@xcept-research.org.

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