

## **South Sudan: if you think education is expensive, try ignorance**

A country without education is like a house without a foundation, and the foundation of South Sudan is crumbling.

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Jesuit Refugee Service

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Maban, 13 January 2015 – When South Sudan became the world's youngest country in 2011, the literacy rate was a mere 27 percent. To improve this statistic, the education ministry of South Sudan set a high goal: reduce the illiteracy rate by 50 percent by 2015.

Entering 2015 with no progress made, South Sudan ranks the most illiterate country in the world. The country's educational facilities, teachers and students have been neglected as resources have been diverted to funding the war which has displaced nearly two million people.

"A country without education is like a house without a foundation, and the foundation of South Sudan is crumbling. You can't build a future for a new nation unless you prioritise education; sadly South Sudan never did so. The country is on the brink of disaster, and one of main reasons is the lack of access to education," said Alvar Sánchez SJ, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Maban Education Coordinator.

Goals are an empty illusion. Since conflict erupted in late 2013, all efforts made to fill educational gaps in the country were halted, especially in remote areas like Maban county in Upper Nile, where JRS has established projects.

The lack of resources allocated to educational materials and school management coupled with a scarcity of teachers has set back students in Upper Nile immensely.

The secondary school in Bunj Town has not opened its doors since December last year, and primary schools in Maban are far from offering even minimal services. For the past two years, students who have finished their primary school courses have still not been able to take their national exams.

Furthermore, a stark reallocation of resources is made evident by the difference between a teacher's salary and that of a soldier. Adwok Kiir, Director of Education of Fashoda county, also in Upper Nile, pointed out that a teacher's monthly salary in the county is 270 South Sudanese pounds (roughly 47 USD) while a soldier for the government army is paid 1,000 South Sudanese pounds (175 USD). As a result, many instructors abandoned their schools to join the military in September.

"If a teacher is paid nearly four times less than military personnel, the price will be paid later. If you think education is expensive, try

ignorance," said Fr .Sánchez.

The cost of violence and ignorance is likely to be felt in South Sudan for years to come. However, if the international community is to make a long-term investment in education, perhaps the return of peace will result.

"Education is a priority, an emergency, something that should not be suspended or postponed...Emergencies – wars or even natural disasters – do not go away overnight; they affect people for years and whole generations miss out on an education...Ignorance breeds violence, which in turn becomes a vicious circle," said Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Adolfo Nicolás speaking at an event commemorating Universal Children's Day with JRS in Rome.

Restoring normalcy. The situation is no better in the refugee camps in Maban county, which hosts Sudanese refugees from neighbouring state of Blue Nile, 80 percent of whom are women and children.

JRS organises teacher training workshops in Maban county, offers recreational activities for children, and teaches English classes to adults from both the refugee and local communities.

In the emergency context, JRS has found that education is not only important to ensure knowledge is passed onto younger generations, but also to restore some sense of normality in the lives of those whose childhoods have been disrupted by violence and displacement.

"For the refugee and for local community youth, school gives them a rhythm they can depend on in a volatile situation. . It allows them to think not only about today, but for tomorrow, for a month from now, for six months from now and that allows them to hope. 'Hope,' as Confucius said, 'breeds peace,'" said Pau Vidal SJ, JRS Maban Project Director.

Changing power dynamics. Education, which breeds hope and builds strong leaders, can have a powerful multiplying effect, especially for women and girls.

Sadly, of the children not able to access education throughout the country, two-thirds are girls. Only six percent of girls finish primary school, but 42 percent marry before they reach 18.

"Educating girls is the first step in helping them realise their rights, become self-reliant and reduce their levels of dependency. They gain self-esteem and believe they can have power over their own lives, that they can do the same things as men," said Isaac Malish, JRS Maban Assistant Education Coordinator.

The ability of women to transform society, if given the right tools, is immense. Almost 100 women peace activists in South Sudan are organising to "advance the cause of peace, healing and

reconciliation." "The women of South Sudan have specific talents that can take the country on a path to peace. They influence their families, especially their sons," said Fr Sánchez.

Cooperative effort. Replacing the current cycle of violence with a cycle of knowledge and peace requires coordinated action between leaders of society, especially parents and school administrators.

"Most parents value girls as assets to marry, because the dowries give them a source of income. They don't know that educating a girl makes her a different kind of resource, one that can allow her to create a better future for herself, her children and society as a whole. Educated women are the best advocates for educating other women in the community," said Isaac.

While 2014 left South Sudan in a protracted conflict, gender balance in education is not something which should be pursued in the aftermath of the crisis, but instead provided during times of displacement to foster strong leaders of the future.

"As Nelson Mandela said, 'education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world' ... In an emergency situation, inclusive education is our passport to a better future," said Fr Sánchez.

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