

The role of livestock in refugee–host community relations

Charles Hoots

In South Sudan, tensions arose when refugees arrived with their livestock, disrupting the existing relationships between the local population and nomadic peoples. Understanding the relations between all three groups of people and their livestock was key to finding solutions.

The Republic of South Sudan became the world's newest country in July 2011, separating from Sudan after decades of civil war. However, the status of border regions in Sudan's Blue Nile and South Kordofan states was not fully clarified in the peace agreement that opened the way for South Sudan's independence, and both regions saw hostilities rekindled in September

2011. Aerial bombardment and ground offensives drove nearly 125,000 people, along with tens of thousands of cattle, sheep and goats, from Blue Nile state to seek refuge across the border in South Sudan.

Living in four camps in Maban County in Upper Nile state, the refugees' relations with the heavily outnumbered local community have sometimes been difficult,



Gendrassa refugee camp, South Sudan.

with livestock playing an important role in the conflicts. Through efforts involving State and local government and both refugee and local communities, however, United Nations (UN) agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) were able to forge agreements between the various groups to reduce tensions.

The people and their animals

The Maban people – the host community in this area – number approximately 45,000.¹ They live in small groups of mud and thatch homesteads, with each group connected loosely to a number of others, forming what are often referred to as villages. Nearly all Maban families keep some livestock, typically one to four cattle, up to six pigs, up to eight sheep and goats, and up to ten chickens, while about two thirds of Maban households own at least one cow. All these animals are free to graze and scavenge during the day. Although livestock and their products are consumed only minimally by the Maban people, their animals play other important roles. They can be sold for cash or bartered in an emergency, and are an important component in the payment by the groom's family to the family of his prospective wife. Livestock, in addition to cash, may also be given as compensation in the event of injury, murder or accidental death of a community member. The Maban people also grow a variety of crops on small plots

which are located half a kilometre or more from their dwellings in order to prevent damage by the livestock living in and around the villages.

By mid-2012, refugees from Sudan's Blue Nile state were estimated to have brought around 100,000 cattle and 150,000 sheep and goats to Maban County, although by the

end of that year up to half of the refugee livestock is thought to have perished, stressed from the long trek and unused to the wetter conditions of Maban. While the refugees in Maban County come from numerous linguistic groups from Sudan's Blue Nile state, the largest single group – and the only people to bring large numbers of livestock with them – is the Ingessana. At home, the Ingessana depend on their animals for use in agriculture and transport, for milk and for meat on special occasions, and as a source of cash in emergencies, a means of securing a wife, compensation for damages, injury or death inflicted on third parties, and a symbol of social prestige.

The Mbororo nomads – a subset of Sudan's Fulfulde-speaking population – follow an entirely nomadic lifestyle, moving between Blue Nile state, South Sudan and neighbouring Ethiopia in search of grazing. The Mbororo arrive in Maban County with their cattle, sheep and goats at the onset of the dry season in November, returning north in May as their cattle do not tolerate the heavy rains that begin then. The Mbororo use their livestock in similar ways to those of the Maban and Ingessana people but depend almost exclusively on their livestock for survival. With the uncertain political situation following South Sudan's independence in 2011, perhaps only a few hundred Mbororo entered South Sudan between November and

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December 2013, many fewer than normal, but their cattle still far outnumbered those of the local Maban and were comparable in number to those owned by the refugees.

In March 2014, Vétérinaires sans Frontières (VSF) Germany estimated livestock numbers owned by local Maban people at 20,000 cattle, 40,000 sheep and goats and 20,000 pigs; by Blue Nile refugees at 50,000 cattle and 80,000 sheep and goats; and by Mbororo nomads at 50,000 cattle and 50,000 sheep and goats.

Sources of solidarity

The indigenous peoples of Blue Nile state in Sudan and Maban County in South Sudan, although linguistically and culturally diverse, have a cultural affinity, and the solidarity between these communities has been reinforced by their mutual suffering during the long Sudanese civil war. The general attitude of the Maban people towards the Mbororo nomads is best described as 'cautious'. The Mbororo keep to themselves, often speak no other local languages and move about freely, exciting admiration but also rumours about their lifestyles.²

The Mbororo are an important source of milk for the Maban population, however, whose own cattle produce little or none during the dry months. The Mbororo sell the milk in local markets and use the cash to purchase those few necessities their animals cannot provide, as well as additional cattle. The nomads also pay local government and communities for grazing rights in the areas they traverse.³

Sources of conflict

Maban host community and the Mbororo: Grazing arrangements between the Mbororo and local Maban communities are well regulated by long-standing arrangements. The animals of the highly mobile nomads are robust but, like all animals, are capable of spreading infectious diseases between the communities through which they pass. However, the local Maban population recognises that the Mbororo generally are more proactive in the care of their livestock – notably by keeping them up to date on vaccinations – than are the local

Maban and the refugee communities, and the local people are therefore relatively unconcerned about the risk of disease.⁴ More ominous for the Mbororo are the political implications of South Sudan's independence. South Sudanese officials have occasionally spoken of forbidding the crossing of Mbororo from Sudan into South Sudan, questioning their political loyalty and citing them as a security risk. Up to at least late 2014, however, the grazing rights paid by the Mbororo in South Sudan were considered too important to lose and so their movement continued relatively unhindered.

Maban host community and the refugees:

Despite the general empathy felt by the Maban population towards the Blue Nile refugees, the latter's large human and animal populations inevitably created tensions. The most serious and immediate problem proved to be the damage caused by the refugees' livestock to the crops of the Maban communities. The subsistence nature of farming in the area meant that the loss of these crops posed a serious risk of food shortages. The degradation of common livestock grazing areas and water sources in Maban was another source of discontent, which increased in step with the number of refugee animals. The lopping of branches from trees to use as feed and the cutting down of trees for fuel further aggravated the problem. Theft of local livestock also increased and the refugees were invariably blamed for it.

My own project, funded by VSF Canada and implemented by VSF Germany, focused on refugees' livestock in acknowledgement of the fact that the loss of these animals to disease would make it impossible for the refugees to resume their way of life once the war was over.⁵ However, resentment by the local population, much of it legitimate, motivated us – and most other agencies – to include the much smaller local population as beneficiaries alongside the refugees. This was done in various ways, for example by establishing village-level boreholes, medical clinics and animal vaccination and treatment programmes. VSF also purchased and slaughtered sheep and goats to decrease the

population pressure from these and then distributed the meat, focusing on the most vulnerable among the local population.

Nevertheless, tensions flared and local communities began imposing hefty fines on refugees whose animals damaged crops.⁶ As many as 20 human deaths were attributed to fighting related to crop damage. As a result, by mid-2013 by mutual agreement the refugees moved their herds to a few sparsely populated grazing areas located as far as 60km from the refugee camps. The system worked well overall. The animals were giving very little, if any, milk so the refugee families did not miss this, and having the animals away from the camps, in an area designated for them by agreement with the local Maban communities, significantly reduced tensions. Conflict resolution protocols were put in place in these areas. In the village of New Guffa, for example, when crops were damaged, a fine was imposed on the animal owner. Specific times were set aside for local animals and then refugee animals to water at the few watering points. The positive outcomes suggest that negotiating such an arrangement in other refugee/livestock situations should be given higher priority in the early stages of a crisis.

Refugees and the Mbororo: Relations between the refugees and the Mbororo nomads are characterised by mistrust. Khartoum's use of local militia to quell rebellions in various parts of Sudan has led the refugees to suspect Mbororo irregular military units of fighting in Blue Nile state. To avoid problems, in 2013 the South Sudanese authorities instructed the Mbororo to pass well west of the refugee camps when moving into South Sudan. The Mbororo thus maintained their access, while the government and local communities still benefited from payments for grazing rights and trade with the nomads but occasions for conflict with the refugees were minimised.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, such relations are highly vulnerable to shifts in the political and military environment. When civil war

broke out in South Sudan in December 2013, renewed rivalries and uncertainties soon drew refugees and host communities in Maban County into unlooked-for conflict. Food aid to the camps was suspended for weeks at a time, triggering increased theft of food and animals by refugees, subsequent retaliation by locals, and the deaths of several livestock herders. Soldiers fighting in Blue Nile state returned to the refugee camps to protect their families, while local communities formed a militia to protect theirs.

Refugee interactions with host communities are complex, and adding livestock to the equation makes them doubly so. While tensions and conflict are inevitable, and finding a new equilibrium under very difficult conditions is fraught with challenge, well-considered arrangements and compromises can be found to mitigate them. The rapidity with which solutions were found and effectively implemented in South Sudan in 2013–14 offers hope that this could be achieved again in Maban County, and could also be possible in similar situations elsewhere. Knowledge of the cultures involved, including an informed awareness of the relationship between the people and their animals, will always be key to understanding the potential for conflict and the appropriateness of possible solutions.

Charles Hoots hootsca@yahoo.com
Livestock Technical Lead, Cultivating New Frontiers in Agriculture www.cnfa.org

1. According to South Sudan's 2008 census.
2. For example, the Mbororo are widely reputed to be skilled sorcerers.
3. This reportedly totalled the equivalent of US\$5,000 across Maban County in the 2012–13 dry season.
4. The nomads purchase vaccines mostly in Sudan and vaccinate their own animals; being so dependent on their cattle, this is a good insurance policy for them. Local Maban populations in normal times are cut off from supplies for half of the year and have little to no refrigeration capacity to store vaccines; as a result, they are not in the habit of vaccinating.
5. The author worked in Maban County from June 2013 until May 2014; the programme ended in August 2014. For more information about the Maban refugee situation, see author's blog at <http://bit.ly/animalspeoplepathogens02082016>
6. Fines amounted to the equivalent of over US\$1,000 per offence around Yusif Batil camp.