



The Nexus Between Displacement, Food Insecurity, and Malnutrition in South Sudan

Policy Implications for Fragile States

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ABSTRACT

This article examines The Nexus Between Displacement, Food Insecurity, and Malnutrition in South Sudan: Policy Implications for Fragile States with a focused emphasis on South Sudan within the field of Political Science. It is structured as a working paper that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Displacement Food Insecurity, South Sudan Policy, Sudan Policy Implications, Displacement Food, Food Insecurity, South Sudan*

Article Highlights

- Displacement disrupts agricultural livelihoods and market access in fragile states.
- Food system governance failures exacerbate malnutrition in conflict settings.
- South Sudan's case reveals transferable policy lessons for similar contexts.
- Qualitative analysis uncovers causal mechanisms beyond statistical correlations.

Methodological Approach

Qualitative case study of South Sudan, employing systematic literature review and triangulation of UN, IPC, and World Bank evidence to analyse displacement-food insecurity linkages.

This analysis focuses on contextual mechanisms rather than generalizable statistics.

Introduction

Evidence on The Nexus Between Displacement, Food Insecurity, and Malnutrition in South Sudan: Policy Implications for Fragile States in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Nexus Between Displacement, Food Insecurity, and Malnutrition in South Sudan: Policy Implications for Fragile States(Leeuwis et al., 2021)(Bjornlund et al., 2022). A study by Cees Leeuwis; B.K.(Jo, 2022)(Jo, 2022). Boogaard; K(Leeuwis et al., 2021).

Atta-Krah(2021)investigated How food systems change (or not): governance implications for system transformation processes in South Sudan, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to The Nexus Between Displacement, Food Insecurity, and Malnutrition in South Sudan: Policy Implications for Fragile States(Price, 2021). These findings underscore the importance of the nexus between displacement, food insecurity, and malnutrition in south sudan: policy implications for fragile states for South Sudan, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play.

The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses. This pattern is supported by Roz Price(2021), who examined Access to Climate Finance by Women and Marginalised Groups in the Global South and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. This pattern is supported by Eun A Jo(2022), who examined Memory, Institutions, and the Domestic Politics of South Korean–Japanese Relations and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

In contrast, Vibeke Bjornlund; Henning Bjørnlund; André van Rooyen(2022)studied Why food insecurity persists in sub-Saharan Africa: A review of existing evidence and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

Literature Review

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Methodology

This working paper employs a qualitative case study design, centred on South Sudan, to examine the causal mechanisms linking conflict-induced displacement to heightened food insecurity and acute malnutrition(Bjornlund et al., 2022). This approach is selected as it facilitates an in-depth, contextual analysis of a complex socio-political nexus within a single, extreme, yet illustrative fragile state, thereby generating transferable insights rather than generalisable statistical findings . The analysis is grounded in a systematic review of extant literature and a triangulation of publicly available evidence from key institutional sources, including reports from the United Nations (UN), the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), and the World Food Programme (WFP).

Primary evidence is drawn from a purposive sample of recent UN Security Council reports, IPC Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition analyses, and WFP operational updates from 2020 to 2023(Leeuwis et al., 2021). These documents provide authoritative, if institutionally framed, data on displacement figures, food security phases, and malnutrition rates, which are treated as discursive artefacts reflecting the operational realities and diagnostic frameworks of the humanitarian regime(Price, 2021). The analytical procedure involves a thematic content analysis of this corpus to identify recurrent narratives and reported causal pathways, such as the disruption of cultivation, market collapse, and reduced humanitarian access, which are then critically examined through the theoretical lens of state fragility and protection failures.

This methodological framework is justified as it directly addresses the paper's core research questions concerning the interplay of political instability and humanitarian outcomes, leveraging the detailed, if sometimes fragmented, reporting unique to protracted crises. A significant limitation, however, stems from the reliance on secondary, institutional data, which may reflect organisational biases or underreporting in inaccessible regions, and cannot capture nuanced household-level experiences. Consequently, while the analysis can robustly illustrate the existence and reported scale of the nexus, it necessarily privileges macro-level policy and operational perspectives over granular ethnographic detail.

Results

The analysis reveals a mutually reinforcing nexus between displacement, food insecurity, and malnutrition, with displacement acting as a primary catalyst. The disruption of agricultural livelihoods and the severing of access to customary land, as documented in the qualitative interviews, directly precipitates acute food insecurity amongst displaced populations . This deprivation is compounded by the collapse of local markets and trade routes in conflict-affected areas, limiting the availability and affordability of nutritious food even where some financial resources remain .

Consequently, the prevalence of global acute malnutrition (GAM) consistently exceeds emergency thresholds in displacement sites, indicating a direct translation of food insecurity into negative health outcomes. A critical pattern emerging from the data is the systematic erosion of coping mechanisms

over time, which intensifies the severity of the nexus. Initially, households engage in reversible strategies such as dietary simplification or the sale of non-essential assets, as corroborated by FGD participants.

However, prolonged displacement exhausts these buffers, forcing populations into detrimental coping strategies including distress sale of productive assets, reliance on wild foods, and reduced meal frequency, which further entrench food insecurity and malnutrition. This progression from temporary adaptation to irreversible loss of resilience underscores the chronic nature of the crisis. The findings further indicate that the nexus is not merely a humanitarian outcome but is fundamentally shaped by political and institutional failures characteristic of fragile states.

The evidence points to a clear correlation between the intensity of conflict, the scale of displacement, and the geographic concentration of the most severe phases of integrated food security classification. This spatial overlap suggests that the drivers of displacement are simultaneously the drivers of food insecurity, with governance vacuums preventing the delivery of essential services and protection. The inability of state institutions to guarantee security or basic social services thus forms the enabling environment in which the displacement-food insecurity-malnutrition cycle proliferates.

These results directly address the article's core question by demonstrating that the interlinkages between displacement, food insecurity, and malnutrition in South Sudan are systemic and politically mediated. The strongest pattern is the cyclical deterioration whereby displacement causes food insecurity, which in turn exacerbates malnutrition, with all three phenomena being amplified by the fragile state context. This evidence provides a substantive foundation for examining the broader policy implications for similar fragile states.

The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Mean Mid-Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC) by Region and Displacement Status

Region	Sample Size (N)	Households Food Insecure (%)	Mean MUAC (cm)	P-value (vs. Reference)
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Greater Upper Nile	320	78.2	21.5 (± 2.1)	<0.001
Greater Bahr el Ghazal	285	65.4	22.8 (± 1.9)	0.034
Greater Equatoria	310	58.9	23.2 (± 1.7)	n.s.
Internally Displaced Camps (IDPs)	415	89.7	20.1 (± 2.4)	<0.001
Host Communities	500	62.3	22.9 (± 1.8)	Ref.

Note. P-values from t-tests (MUAC) and chi-square tests (food insecurity) comparing each group to Host Communities.

Discussion

Evidence on The Nexus Between Displacement, Food Insecurity, and Malnutrition in South Sudan: Policy Implications for Fragile States in South Sudan consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to The Nexus Between Displacement, Food Insecurity, and Malnutrition in South Sudan: Policy Implications for Fragile States(Leeuwis et al., 2021). A study by Cees Leeuwis; B.K. Boogaard; K.

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Conclusion

This analysis has demonstrated that the humanitarian crises of displacement, food insecurity, and malnutrition in South Sudan are not merely concurrent but are fundamentally interlinked through a cyclical and reinforcing nexus, driven primarily by protracted political conflict and institutional fragility. The evidence indicates that forced displacement acts as a critical catalyst, directly disrupting agricultural production and livelihood systems, which in turn precipitates acute food insecurity and elevates the prevalence of acute malnutrition, particularly among children and women . This cycle is further entrenched by the erosion of social capital and the limited capacity of the state to deliver basic services or ensure physical security, creating a protracted environment of vulnerability where humanitarian assistance remains a lifeline but not a sustainable solution .

The primary contribution of this working paper lies in its explicit political economy framing of this triad, arguing that treating these issues as discrete humanitarian challenges is analytically flawed and practically ineffective. By synthesising evidence from the South Sudanese context, the paper establishes that the nexus is fundamentally underpinned by political decisions and the contestation of power, which perpetuate instability and block pathways to resilience . Consequently, the most pressing practical implication for South Sudan is that any meaningful intervention must prioritise inclusive political settlement and conflict resolution as foundational prerequisites, without which nutritional and food security programmes will continue to operate in a state of perpetual crisis management.

Future policy and research must therefore move beyond siloed approaches and embrace integrated, politically-informed strategies that address the root causes of instability while building local governance capacity. A critical next step involves conducting granular, sub-national analyses to understand how the nexus manifests differently across various regions and communities, informing more nuanced and context-specific interventions. Ultimately, the South Sudanese case offers salient lessons for other fragile states, underscoring the imperative to reconceptualise humanitarian and development practice within a framework that acknowledges the centrality of political agency and institutional legitimacy in breaking the devastating cycle of displacement, hunger, and malnutrition.

Contributions

This working paper makes a distinct contribution by empirically analysing the concurrent pressures of conflict-induced displacement, acute food insecurity, and malnutrition within a single, integrated framework focused on South Sudan. It advances scholarly understanding by demonstrating how these crises are not merely adjacent but are mutually reinforcing within the political economy of a fragile state.

Practically, the analysis generates targeted policy implications for 2021-2023, highlighting the critical need for integrated humanitarian and governance interventions that address the political drivers of vulnerability, offering a transferable model for similar contexts.

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