

TECHNICAL BRIEF:

Towards evidence-driven education in emergencies: ERICC research agenda for South Sudan

The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Research Programme Consortium is a global research and learning partnership that strives to transform education policy and practice in conflict and protracted crisis around the world – ultimately to help improve holistic outcomes for children – through building a global hub for a rigorous, context-relevant and actionable evidence base.

ERICC seeks to identify the most effective approaches for improving access, quality, and continuity of education to support sustainable and coherent education systems and holistic learning and development of children in conflict and crisis. ERICC aims to bridge research, practice, and policy with accessible and actionable knowledge – at local, national, regional and global levels – through co- construction of research and collaborative partnerships.

ERICC is led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with Academic Lead IOE, UCL’s Faculty of Education and Society, and expert partners include Centre for Lebanese Studies, Common Heritage Foundation, Forcier Consulting, ODI, Osman Consulting, Oxford Policy Management and Queen Rania Foundation. During ERICC’s inception period, NYU-TIES provided research leadership, developed the original ERICC Conceptual Framework and contributed to early research agenda development. ERICC is supported by UK Aid.

Countries in focus include Bangladesh (Cox’s Bazar), Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.

Disclaimer

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A. Background: Education in South Sudan

In South Sudan, the education landscape grapples with a wider ‘polycrisis’ of challenges facing the country. Protracted subnational violence, mass internal and external displacement, economic depression, floods and other climatic shocks, poor infrastructure, and a crisis of sexual and gender-based violence collectively contribute to an arduous environment for education delivery. Additionally, policy-related factors, such as weak governance, fragmented data systems, political instability and severe resource constraints, further compound these challenges (UNESCO, 2017). Consequently, South Sudan contends with one of the most fragile education systems globally, characterised by low educational attainment rates, literacy levels and school enrolment (MoGEI, 2021a; UNESCO, 2023). As of 2023, South Sudan has an estimated 2.8 million out-of-school children, which may represent the highest proportion of the school-aged population globally (MoGEI, 2023).

Our prior research identified considerable gaps in the evidence base concerning education in South Sudan (Wagner-Tsoni et al., 2024). While certain aspects of education in South Sudan have received more attention in the literature and in policy and programming, such as girls’ education and the challenges facing teachers, there are many dimensions that remain understudied and hence poorly understood. There are noticeable gaps in the extent and scope of evidence related to determinants of students’ academic and social and emotional learning (SEL) outcomes, mental health conditions, the education system’s preparedness against shocks, and disparities in educational needs and outcomes for various marginalised groups, among others.

There is a pressing need for more comprehensive evidence to thoroughly assess the urgent needs, challenges and opportunities in South Sudan’s education sector. This study seeks to contribute to addressing this gap by formulating a Research Agenda for education research in South Sudan by identifying gaps in the evidence base, conducting primary research, and understanding the priorities of various national and local-level stakeholders. Building upon previously identified evidence gaps as a point of departure, the objective is to develop a Research Agenda for South Sudan to help future research endeavours address the educational needs of the population.

B. ERICC Research Agenda development process

This Technical Brief draws on the full ERICC Research Agenda for South Sudan working paper (Wagner Tsoni et al., 2024) as the final product of ERICC South Sudan’s inception phase. The ERICC team in South Sudan, led by IRC South Sudan (operational lead) and Forcier Consulting (technical lead), conducted a country scan to gain insights into the existing evidence gaps in education, including:

- 1. Stakeholder mapping:** A total of 132 key stakeholders were identified, spanning government authorities (23), donors (4), United Nations (UN) agencies (6), national non-governmental organisations (48), international non-governmental organisations (43), international governmental organisations (4), and inter-sectoral coordination groups (4).
- 2. A systematic evidence review:** This effort identified 128 high-quality education research papers, scrutinising four pivotal drivers of learning and development amid conflict and protracted crisis: access, quality, continuity and system coherence. The evidence review provided a comprehensive overview of the current state of the educational sector in South Sudan, with a focus on the three study sites (Central Equatoria, Northern Bahr el Ghazal and Upper Nile). This evidence review will be published separately.
- 3. Project mapping:** A third research activity involved a mapping of current and recent education projects in South Sudan. Over the past decades, a myriad of both national and international stakeholders has

undertaken numerous education projects across the country. This mapping exercise identified five current large-scale educational programmes within ERICC's three thematic areas (access to, quality, and continuity of education), along with 14 previous large-scale projects and four upcoming programmes slated for implementation.

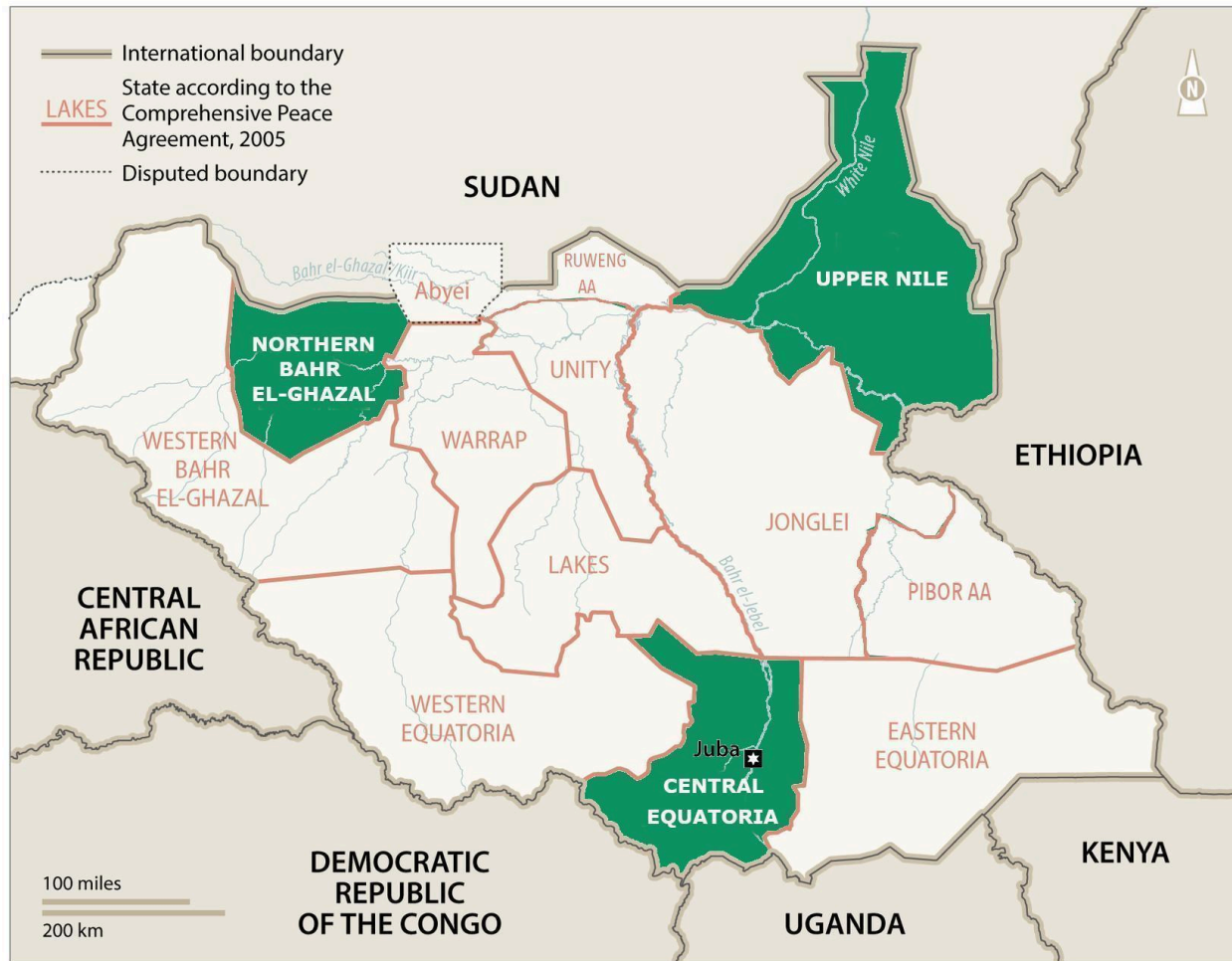
- 4. Data systems review:** Two approaches were employed: i) a desk review and ii) four surveys with data systems focal points. The surveys were conducted with respondents from government authorities and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), each associated with one of the country's four major educational data collection systems: Education Monitoring Information System (EMIS), Refugee EMIS (REMIS), School Attendance Monitoring System (SAMS) and National Education Functionality Data. The review underscored that, despite diverse stakeholders collecting education data through multiple systems, persistent challenges remain regarding the comprehensiveness, reliability and accuracy of this data.
- 5. Conceptual Framework mapping:** Findings from the country scan were mapped against the ERICC conceptual framework (Kim, Dolan & Aber, 2022) to formulate strategies for conducting research that will inform education policy and practice – and help guide future education research initiatives – with the overarching goal of contributing to addressing the overall research question: ***What works to improve access, quality, continuity and coherence of education for children affected by conflict and protracted crisis, how, for whom, in what conditions, and at what cost?***
- 6. Continued stakeholder engagement and research agenda co-construction: Key informant interviews (KIIs)** were then conducted across 41 stakeholders to capture national- and state- level stakeholder perspectives on education delivery, programming and research in South Sudan. Respondents included five officials from the national Ministry of General Education and Instruction (MoGEI), nine officials from state MoGEIs, four technical practitioners/sector specialists, nine individuals from INGOs/UN agencies, six from national non-governmental organisations (NGOs)/civil society organisations/community-based organisations, and eight from school management. Concurrently, a **Country Advisory Committee (CAC)** was established, providing a sounding board of key education stakeholders from the national government (including MoGEI), INGOs, NGOs, civil society organisations, technical practitioners and other researchers. Over a series of CAC meetings between November and December 2023, forums were held for discussing and prioritising the sixteen evidence gaps identified through the ERICC evidence review, obtaining feedback on ERICC activities, harmonising activities, and using networks for advancing the use of evidence in education policymaking and practice.

Integrating all of the outlined research activities, the ERICC Research Agenda for South Sudan was drafted in December 2023. This was subsequently refined and agreed upon in a national workshop held in Juba on 7 February 2024 with a broad range of participants from across South Sudan's education sector. This Research Agenda guided ERICC's research programme in South Sudan for the remainder of 2024.

Overall, the country scan laid the foundation for meaningful and collaborative discussions with key stakeholders, to co-construct the country's Research Agenda that will address the evidence gaps that are most pressing for solving educational challenges in South Sudan.

While the study provides information on education in South Sudan on a national level, particular attention was paid to three states: Central Equatoria, Northern Bahr el Ghazal and Upper Nile (see Figure 1). The choice ensures representation from the three historical regions of South Sudan: Equatoria, Greater Bahr el Ghazal and Greater Upper Nile. Primary data collection was conducted in these states to inform the choice of evidence gaps and research themes discussed.

Figure 1. Map of South Sudan highlighting the three states covered by this study



C. Results: a longlist of evidence gaps

The Country Scan process shed light on the evidence gaps in the field of education in emergencies in South Sudan. Addressing these knowledge gaps in future research could help to overcome structural, contextual, political and socio-economic educational barriers in the country, thereby helping to improve access to and continuity of quality education in South Sudan. Furthermore, even though evidence on the role of education in fostering social cohesion and peacebuilding in South Sudan is still at an early stage, preliminary indications suggest that improving education can potentially address underlying and hidden root causes of conflict by fostering civic values, a sense of common South Sudanese identity, and social cohesion.

In the country scan process, different research activities yielded different evidence gaps. The first eight evidence gaps were identified through our systematic literature review; the following four were highlighted by stakeholders during our first CAC meeting; and the final four gaps were drawn from the KIIs.

Here is an overview of all 16 evidence gaps:

1. Limited evidence on academic and social and emotional learning (SEL) determinants

Information on academic and SEL determinants in South Sudan is both limited and fragmented, particularly regarding disaggregated data and data at the subnational level. This includes considering academic and SEL outcomes in the context of analysing: schools in conflict-prone areas versus others; assessing schools with varying levels of infrastructure quality; teachers with different levels of training, motivation and background; analysis of public schools versus private schools; and the comparison of host community schools with camp-based schools.

2. Harmonisation and utilisation of education data systems

Education data is collected through a number of different data systems, yet there is a lack of evidence on the advantages and obstacles associated with harmonising these systems. Additionally, there is a dearth of analysis linking SAMS data to drivers of learning and establishing institutionalised procedures for this integration. Understanding how and why education data systems remain unharmonised, are often subject to scepticism over their quality, and are not always used in decision making constitutes a large evidence gap.

3. Limited evidence on the educational needs of marginalised groups

The knowledge base on girls' education in South Sudan is relatively comprehensive, although concerns persist about the alignment of policies with on-the-ground conditions. Conversely, there is a notable scarcity of evidence and data regarding children living with disabilities (CLWDs); children associated with armed forces and armed groups (CAAFAG); children from pastoralist communities; and displaced children, including those living as internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, and returnees (from prior displacement situations). Understanding how the education system currently serves marginalised groups in South Sudan, all of whom are believed to significantly contribute to the country's acute out-of-school children crisis, and how it can better do so is an important area of evidence that needs to be developed to foster greater equity.

4. Inadequate understanding of the disparities in education delivery both between and within states

The current state of understanding regarding inequality in formal and informal education service delivery and outcomes in South Sudan reveals a significant knowledge gap. This gap extends to both intra-state and inter-state levels, as little evidence exists regarding the differences in educational access, resources and outcomes. Considering the fact that inequality in the education system can be a driver of conflict and that the education sector can both foster or hinder peacebuilding processes, this evidence gap highlights a critical need for comprehensive research and analysis.

5. Limited evidence on language and curriculum preferences

Evidence suggests that the language of instruction and implementation of the national curriculum may differ across the country at the local level. Little is known on how to effectively implement the national language policy and national curriculum, especially in linguistically diverse areas. Moreover, there is a lack of evidence on how system-level choices over language and curriculum may facilitate or impede educational progress and how these may have contributed to peace reconstruction or exacerbated existing tensions and conflict.

6. Major evidence gaps on children's mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)

The substantial knowledge gap regarding the prevalence of mental health issues in South Sudan and their potential influence on the country's education landscape is twofold. Firstly, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding the prevalence of mental health issues among children in the region and how these issues impact the education landscape, particularly in influencing students' learning experiences, academic outcomes, and overall wellbeing. Secondly, there is a need to explore effective strategies and interventions for supporting mental health and psychosocial wellbeing among students.

7. Insufficient coherence between policy priorities and practice

Our research indicates that the priority areas outlined by the MoGEI in its General Education Sector Plan 2023–2027 are reasonably consistent with the existing body of literature on education development in South Sudan, such as the importance of enhancing the management capacity of educational institutions. Where we find gaps between policy focus and evidence are regarding alternative education systems and technical and vocational education and training (TVET). The absence of evidence regarding the demand, supply, effectiveness, implementation dynamics, target beneficiaries, and contextual factors influencing alternative education systems and TVET means that these remain poorly understood despite their prominence in policy.

8. Lack of rigorous programme/project impact evaluations

Of the education interventions reviewed in the systematic literature review, only Girls' Education South Sudan (GESS) had performed regular, in-depth assessments over the years. This highlights an overarching scarcity of high-quality impact evaluations in the education sector and thus gaps in our understanding of areas such as the quality and impact of education interventions, effectiveness of teacher training, and the inclusivity and sustainability of education programmes. Furthermore, there's a need for more nuanced evaluations that consider the socio-economic and cultural context of South Sudan, including conflict sensitivity in programming and the role of community engagement in enhancing quality.

9. Limited understanding of education service delivery and programme financing

There is a lack of evidence regarding who is funding what, where and at what cost, in terms of education interventions, a gap that can significantly contribute to issues of disparity in educational access, quality and outcomes. Meanwhile, there is a prevalent perception that resolving coordination or replication issues could be facilitated through the acquisition of this evidence.

10. Absence of evaluation of policy formulation and implementation over time

Key education policies like the General Education Strategic Plan (GESp) and National General Education Policy (NGEP) constitute time-limited strategic plans, yet evaluations before the next iteration is produced are notably absent. Lessons learned from the formulation and implementation of these policies may be overlooked, resulting in significant opportunity costs for the educational sector in South Sudan.

11. Limited evidence on the needs and challenges of pastoralist education

South Sudan's diverse landscape includes a substantial nomadic population, characterised by an itinerant pastoral lifestyle that often clashes with conventional education systems and sedentary cultural norms. Additionally, intercommunal violence and cattle raiding further exacerbate these challenges. However, there is a lack of evidence regarding the educational needs and outcomes, including the associated risk and protective factors, of pastoral communities in South Sudan. While specific data on out-of-school rates for pastoralist children is unavailable, there is a prevailing perception that pastoralist children form a significant portion of the out-of-school population. While the MoGEI designed the Pastoralist Education Programme, aiming to make education more accessible for pastoralist communities, there is no evidence on the extent to which the programme has been implemented, nor on its effectiveness.

12. Limited understanding of education sector governance and operating models

There are very few studies that focus on how education decisions are made at different levels, and by whom. Further, there is a lack of evidence on private versus public schools, and on public–private partnerships. Understanding the institutional frameworks of education policymaking, practice, financing and political economy are important parts of giving clarity to the wider picture around education delivery.

13. Deficient evidence on system preparedness and adaptation measures against shocks

While numerous anecdotal instances highlight adaptation measures taken in response to conflict, floods and other shocks, there is a lack of robust evidence regarding the effectiveness of education system mitigation against such shocks at both the national and state levels. Cataloguing responses to past shocks and analysing preparedness against future shocks are hence key areas for further study.

14. No systematic understanding of processes and challenges for teacher training

There are no studies that systematically examine the organisation and function of National Teachers Training Institutes (NTTIs) in South Sudan. The prevailing perception suggests that teachers may be underqualified, potentially impacting the overall effectiveness of the learning process. Anecdotally both the evidence and stakeholders suggest that many teachers are recruited, trained and deployed outside of the formal NTTI system – though little data exists to say to what extent, how and why this is.

15. Underexplored impact of school feeding programmes and attendance

While there is a robust global evidence base affirming the effectiveness of school feeding programmes in enhancing school attendance, the specific impact and cost-effectiveness of these programmes within South Sudan remain underexplored. Despite the scarcity of localised data, there is a widespread perception among educators and policymakers in South Sudan that school feeding programmes are crucial for encouraging school attendance and ensuring the continuity of education. This suggests that, while the global efficacy of school feeding programmes is well-established, dedicated studies in South Sudan are essential to optimise these interventions for the country's specific needs and conditions.

16. Insufficient evidence on the effects of Girls' Education South Sudan (GESS) transfers on boys' education

While robust evidence underscores the effectiveness of GESS in advancing girls' education, its impact on boys' education remains less documented. Various factors have contributed to perceptions that boys' education may have faced challenges following the initiation of GESS, as families may have prioritised educating girls over boys. Addressing this evidence gap is vital, not only for understanding the comprehensive impact of GESS on the educational landscape but also for exploring its role in offering boys and young men viable alternatives to joining armed forces and groups.

B. Prioritising a Research Agenda

In combination with input gathered from the second CAC meeting, a draft Research Agenda was developed by prioritising six evidence gaps from the longlist. These were then refined to five themes and prioritised according to the principles of urgency, significance and potential impact on South Sudan's education sector during a national stakeholder engagement workshop. This prioritisation involved discussions with stakeholders to pinpoint research areas with the greatest potential to drive positive change. This iterative process of co-constructing the Research Agenda was structured to collectively achieve three primary objectives: (1) establish priority research topics; (2) identify evidence gaps and define the types of research needed to address them; (3) set research objectives and research questions that target the evidence gaps in the priority research topics.

The ensuing five research themes were prioritised and form the basis of the South Sudan Research Agenda, with the order presented here reflecting the priority ranking given by the national workshop participants (from highest to lowest priority):

Theme I: Out-of-school children, with a focus on pastoralist communities

In 2020, there was an estimated 2.8 million out-of-school children aged 3–17 in South Sudan – a notable increase from 2.2 million in 2016 (MoGEI, 2021b). While data on the distribution of out-of-school children is generally poor, the situation is assumed to be especially dire for girls, children living in rural areas, children from pastoralist communities, children living in areas prone to seasonal flooding, CLWDs, CAAFAGs and displaced children. Almost all South Sudanese children fall into at least one of these at-risk categories, and this alarming situation risks further entrenching the educational crisis in the country (UNESCO, 2018). Nomadic populations face some of the lowest rates of school enrolment and completion, posing intricate challenges for educational authorities, with a majority of the 2.8 million out-of-school children in South Sudan believed to come from pastoralist communities (MoGEI, 2023).

Although key stakeholders acknowledged the educational needs of all these marginalised groups, there was a particular emphasis on the need for evidence regarding education for children from pastoralist communities. Two main reasons are provided for this: i) a shared perception among stakeholders suggests that pastoralists constitute the most significant out-of-school group in South Sudan, believed to be a majority (MoGEI, 2023), and ii) the intricate links between pastoralist lifestyles, education and conflict, meaning that pastoralist education touches on many cross-cutting themes. Research has highlighted that in South Sudan livestock can be a driver of conflict: consequently, tensions between pastoral communities and frequent cattle raiding further exacerbate the compounded challenges on pastoralist education (Idris, 2018). On the other hand, access to education for pastoralists could act as a mitigating factor to conflict, by engaging youth in education and preventing their participation in armed groups. As such, we focus on pastoralist communities for this study because this group shares important characteristics related to access to education (e.g. displacement, involvement in conflict, harmful gender norms).

MoGEI has for at least a decade had a specific initiative, the Pastoralist Education Programme (PEP), targeting these groups with its alternative education systems. Despite the PEP featuring in MoGEI's policies and plans, there is a notable absence of evidence on the impact and effectiveness of this programme, and indeed it is unclear to what extent this programme is being implemented on the ground despite existing in policy documents. To date, both the government and development partners have implemented a number of different interventions tailored to the unique needs of pastoralist communities, including mobile schools (Forcier Consulting, 2016). Nevertheless, these efforts have generally been of limited scale and duration and have not been systematically documented, such that drawing lessons learned is challenging at present.

Based on the above, evidence is crucial to identify the educational needs of pastoralists and formulate effective strategies for addressing these needs in policies and programmes. To achieve this, we intend to undertake a two-phase study that combines formative and implementation research with fieldwork in pastoralist communities preceding fieldwork with policymakers and programmers.

- **Research objective 1:** Identify the educational needs and outcomes of marginalised groups, particularly pastoralists.
- **Research objective 2:** Identify how to best target the educational needs and outcomes of marginalised groups, particularly pastoralists.

Theme 2: Determinants of academic outcomes, SEL and MHPSS

Despite the consensus among scholars and educational stakeholders regarding the overall poor academic outcomes of the South Sudanese population (UNESCO, 2018), there is a notable absence of current, relevant and cohesive data regarding student performance, especially equity at the subnational level (Wagner-Tsoni et al., 2024). While differences between male and female students' academic performance are relatively well captured, there is very little data on education outcomes disaggregated for other important socio-economic or contextual factors (e.g. children's displacement status, types of schools). During interviews, respondents acknowledged a reliance on data from the Education Management Information System (EMIS), even though it is deemed insufficient to capture certain indicators, especially those related to learning outcomes, and there was scepticism among a number of stakeholders around EMIS data quality more broadly. While the MoGEI reports large disparities across and within states in the number of (qualified) teachers, student/teacher ratios, access to learning materials and students per class, we understand that to date these have not been analysed against academic attainment in South Sudan (MoGEI, 2021b).

Further, it is widely known that conflict and forced displacement have profound negative effects on the mental health and overall wellbeing of populations. Estimates of the prevalence of mental health conditions in South Sudan suggest that this is both a severe and hidden crisis. The prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder in the population is notably high and, in 2017, it was estimated that more than 907,000 South Sudanese children were experiencing some form of psychosocial distress (Goldsmith & Cockcroft-McKay, 2019). It is challenging to envision a crisis of such magnitude not influencing children's educational outcomes, particularly in regard to SEL, even though there is a lack of evidence on this point. There is an important peacebuilding element to the hidden mental health crisis because affected populations may struggle to integrate into communities or be susceptible to recruitment into violence or if their psychosocial support needs are not met.

In the course of this research, key informants have anecdotally suggested improvements in the academic performance of South Sudanese youth over the last decade. However, the available data on this is limited and fragmented, especially at a subnational level, making it challenging to validate or refute these indications. Furthermore, although a number of current education interventions have a stipulated aim to improve students' learning outcomes, very limited quantitative evidence has been collected to validate how these have impacted academic and SEL outcomes. This is also the case for MHPSS in regard to both learners and teachers.

To rectify these gaps, especially at the subnational level, it is crucial to establish a more precise evidence base for informed central planning and policy development in response to current and potential educational emergencies. The research needed to address this gap involves benchmarking exercises to measure academic, SEL and MHPSS attainment for students across South Sudan, as well as formative research to identify macro, meso and micro-level characteristics and processes influencing children's learning and wellbeing. Further, these studies should identify possible heterogeneity in how different factors and environments may shape academic, SEL and MHPSS outcomes across the country's diverse population groups. Interdisciplinary mixed-methods research methodologies are recommended, with a particular focus on employing attainment measurement tools suitable for children with limited formal education and diverse linguistic backgrounds.

- **Research objective 1:** Describe the current status of academic, SEL and MHPSS outcomes of learners in South Sudan and identify how these are influenced by micro, macro and meso-level characteristics and processes for different population groups across the country.

- **Research objective 2:** Assess the overall effectiveness, efficiency, coherence, impact and sustainability of education programmes in South Sudan and measure the extent to which programme objectives related to academic and SEL outcomes have been achieved.

Theme 3: Evaluation of policy formulation and implementation over time

Education in South Sudan is governed by a spectrum of policies. Despite some minor differences in knowledge levels observed among various stakeholders during our interviews, the evidence does not suggest that there is a structural gap in the country's overall education policy framework. Indeed, much technical and financial support has been (and continues to be) given to develop education policy in South Sudan. The crux of perceived education policy-related challenges lies in the implementation phase. Stakeholders noted hindrances attributed to a disconnect between the national government and lower levels of authority. Issues in information flows from the national to the state level, coupled with a perceived lack of willingness to implement policies and plans, were identified as impediments to policy execution. Additionally, key time-limited policy frameworks and plans, such as the GESP and the NGEF, were perceived by stakeholders as having new editions after the old policy expired without having undergone a thorough evaluation into the implementing challenges of the previous iteration or consultative processes to determine the new policy. Stakeholders raised concerns that this approach may have led to missed opportunities for learning from the formulation and implementation of prior policies.

Although indications of limited education policy implementation in South Sudan were identified, there is little evidence explaining these challenges let alone strategies to overcome them. Thus, there is a need for research focusing on the various implementation processes and pathways, along with their associated challenges and opportunities, of educational policies and programmes in South Sudan. Since stakeholders perceive coordination and cooperation between the different levels of government to be a contributing factor to the observed limitations, future research should pay particular attention to existing information flows, strategies to streamline these information flows, and how (and to what extent) a lack in political will is currently hindering policy implementation in the country.

Secondly, a comprehensive evaluation of policy formulation and implementation within the MoGEI is imperative. To establish effective evaluation mechanisms, it is essential to identify key enablers and constraints at both the formulation and implementation stages. Additionally, determining the most effective strategies to integrate evaluation within the MoGEI's policy and decision-making processes is crucial, and to understand exactly who is involved in these processes versus who ideally should be, to ensure inclusive and technically robust policy formulation and implementation. This process could be enhanced by examining best practices from other countries facing conflict and protracted crises where such policy evaluations have been implemented.

- **Research objective 1:** Identify ways and conditions to promote the alignment and accountability of education policy and programming in South Sudan
- **Research objective 2:** Identify ways and conditions to lessen the disconnect between national and lower levels of authority within the MoGEI

Theme 4: Assessment of system preparedness and adaptation to shocks

With a history of protracted conflict, weak governance, economic stresses, mass internal and external displacement of populations, and extreme weather and floods exacerbated by the advancing climate crisis, South Sudan is highly susceptible to various types of shocks. In such a context, it is key to understand the

underlying causes of vulnerability that could hinder basic service provision, including education, by exacerbating both the persistence and duration of shocks as well as the heightened impact of combined shocks (Avis, 2020). At the end of 2023, it was estimated that:

- 2.2 million people in South Sudan were internally displaced, primarily due to conflict and flooding, with over 1 million people affected by floods in 2022 alone (OCHA, 2023).
- 520,000 people, mostly South Sudanese, had returned to the country fleeing the outbreak of civil war in Sudan in April 2023, most of whom were sheltering in transit and border areas (OCHA, 2023).
- 7.1 million of the 12.4 million total population (i.e. c.60%) would require food assistance in the coming year due to the global food crisis (OCHA, 2023).

Aggregate numbers alone do not do justice to the severity of these shocks on people's ability to attain their basic rights, including access to education, because the impacts tend to be concentrated in vulnerable areas. Since 2020, Unity state has experienced its most severe floods in 60 years, displacing hundreds of thousands of people and shifting education service delivery from community schools to camps (UN Peacekeeping, 2021). Further, in the past two years, areas such as Yei, Kajo Keji, Magwi, Tonj, Abyei, Pibor, Pochalla, Fashoda, Koch, Leer, Tambura, and Rubkona have been sites of heavy conflict, interrupting schooling due to destruction and displacement. Finally, in the last 12 months alone, counties in South Sudan's northern states, notably Maban, Renk, Raga, Aweil North, and Aweil East, have taken in hundreds of thousands of returnees from Sudan, many of whom are children who require schooling in already strained service delivery contexts.

To establish a resilient and sustainable education system capable of managing shocks without constant adjustments, research is required to fill these evidence gaps, generating evidence about South Sudan's education system disaster preparedness. This research should evaluate the impact of shocks on the coherence of the education system in South Sudan, focusing on access, quality and continuity of education. Since South Sudan is prone to a wide variety of shocks, it is vital that research also assesses the combined impact of various shocks. We propose to achieve this through a series of targeted case studies that look at shock-affected areas before, during and after the shock occurred. This approach will help us to understand how and why the system did (or didn't) adapt and what measures could have prevented the need for adaptation.

- **Research objective 1:** Assess education system capacity to withstand shocks with a focus on understanding system's resilience and ability to manage stress without constant adjustment.
- **Research objective 2:** Understand the robustness of policy frameworks to deal with shocks and identify opportunities to bolster system resilience.

Theme 5: Examination of processes and challenges in teacher training

The capacity of schools to deliver high-quality education is intricately linked to the qualifications of their teachers – the better qualified the teachers, the better the performance of the schools (Ochan & Imbuki, 2017). In South Sudan, the teacher-student ratio is 1:40 for primary schools and 1:43 for pre-primary schools, according to the latest education census (MoGEI, 2021b). These ratios differ significantly across states: while Central Equatoria and Northern Bahr el Ghazal are reported to have the lowest teacher-student ratios (1:33 and 1:34, respectively), the teacher-student ratio in Upper Nile is as high as 1:79 (Ministry of General Education and Instruction, 2021b). The 2021 Education Census suggests that 26% of schools across the country are non-operational due to lack of teachers (MoGEI, 2021b). This highlights the significant challenge South Sudan faces in mobilising teachers, particularly in the regions most affected by conflict and crisis.

Further, looking at the capacity as well as the number of teachers, in South Sudan less than half of all teachers

have undergone formal teacher training and a significant proportion of teachers still need to complete their primary and secondary education (Haider, 2021). When assessing the number of pupils per qualified teacher, for the states above we found teacher–student ratios of 1:57 for Central Equatoria, 1:90 for Northern Bahr el Ghazal and 1:104 for Upper Nile (compared to an overall ratio of 1:77 in South Sudan) (MoGEI, 2021b; Windle Trust, n.d.); this ratio is considerably lower at secondary level (1:34 as a national average) (MoGEI, 2021b).

Since, to the best of our knowledge, there are no studies that systematically examine the organisation and function of NTTIs in South Sudan, more research is needed that assesses the policy, processes, administration and funding of NTTIs in the country. The type of research proposed to fill this gap should aim to assess the current state of NTTIs in the country and how these institutes can best produce the desired changes in the context of South Sudan.

The first step would involve conducting descriptive studies that help us to better understand the organisation and function of NTTIs in South Sudan. Here, we propose to conduct studies that assess which pre-existing conditions influence the functioning of NTTIs in South Sudan and how these institutes fit into the larger educational policy framework. These studies would also consider the different stakeholders involved, as well as the current processes to manage NTTIs, and how these actors and processes have an effect on the delivery of teacher training in the country. This research would involve interviews with the MoGEI and other education stakeholders at the national and state levels regarding NTTIs, as well as field data collection at different NTTIs to understand their functioning in practice by speaking to administrators and teachers.

Once the current state of NTTIs in South Sudan is better understood, a next step would be to conduct implementation research to assess the general functioning and, in particular, the delivery of teacher education via these institutions. Here, we propose to collaborate with various involved stakeholders, particularly the MoGEI and the World Bank. Research should help to identify challenges and opportunities to improve the delivery of teacher training based on the past experience of NTTIs and other education interventions in South Sudan, while also being cost-effective and scalable. In order to do so, research should also consider how pre-existing conditions at the local level have an effect on individuals' decisions to start or continue a career in education and how these relate to the choice or availability of either NTTIs or partner-led teacher training interventions.

- **Research objective 1:** Assesses the current state of NTTI policy and programming in South Sudan
- **Research objective 2:** Implementation research to understand the delivery of teacher training at NTTIs

C. Conclusion

Following the identification of key research priorities outlined in the South Sudan Research Agenda, the next steps involve a collaborative review process with ERICC stakeholders. This aims to align the priorities with broader educational goals, needs and discourses relevant to crisis and conflict contexts, defined in the ERICC Global Research Agenda (Diazgranados & Pherali, forthcoming). As there are substantial overlaps between the ERICC Global Research Agenda and the five research themes for South Sudan introduced in this report, the potential for increasing robustness of both Research Agendas through a joint review process is high.

Building upon previously identified evidence gaps, and based on a series of stakeholder workshops across states and strata of society, this study has developed a research framework for South Sudan that is centred around five key priority areas for future research:

1. Out-of-school children, with a focus on pastoralist communities

Formative and implementation research is required to understand the specific educational needs of pastoralist communities in South Sudan. This population, believed to constitute a majority of the 2.8 million children in South Sudan, is targeted by the MoGEI through a specific education intervention, the Pastoralist Education Programme. However, limited data exists on the efficacy of this programme to date, or whether it is suited to the needs of pastoralist communities.

2. Academic, SEL and MHPSS determinants

Attainment benchmarking and formative research regarding academic, SEL and MHPSS determinants in the South Sudanese context will be conducted. This will provide valuable insights into the state of play in the education sector in South Sudan, particularly in regard to yielding new disaggregated data, and allow for new perspectives on the effectiveness of past interventions and new ideas towards improving the environment for both learners and teachers.

3. Evaluation of policy formulation and implementation over time

An assessment of the evolution of key education policies and plans over time will help to understand how and by whom they are formulated and whether they build on the lessons learned from previous iterations. Further, interviews with education authorities at different levels (national, state, county) will identify vertical blockages that may hinder policy implementation. This technical research piece will provide valuable insights into education system coherence and guide future policy formulation and implementation.

4. System preparedness against shocks

The preparedness and adaptability of the education system in South Sudan to withstand various shocks, including conflicts and natural disasters, will be evaluated through a series of focused case studies of crisis points and responses. This research will contribute to the general understanding of education system resilience and inform policy and planning.

5. Processes and challenges for teacher training

The processes and challenges involved in NTTI state and function in South Sudan will be investigated, focusing on understanding the recruitment, training and deployment processes for teachers. This research will shed light on a crucial but currently less understood part of the education system in South Sudan and inform future policy around NTTIs and teacher training more broadly.

Next, the highest priority study (out-of-school children, with a focus on pastoralist communities) will be undertaken during 2024. This was conceptualised during May and June and data was collected from July to September. Analysis and writing will take place between October and December. Careful consideration of the timeline, setting/context, target sample and potential implementation partners and stakeholders will be essential for the successful execution of these and subsequent steps. The development of tentative research plans, including opportunities for programme/policy evaluation, will align with the proposed research objectives, laying the groundwork for meaningful contributions to the focal context's education policy and programming and to the ERICC evidence base.

The refined research priorities, shaped through collaboration and prioritisation, will serve as a roadmap for future research. They have the potential to contribute not only to immediate policy considerations but also to lay the foundation for sustained improvements in South Sudan's education sector. This holistic approach aims to comprehensively address urgent needs and challenges in the country's education sector.

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